

# **To live amongst the dead: an ethnographic exploration of mass graves in Cambodia**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses mass graves as a lens through which to examine how people in contemporary Cambodia use the Khmer Rouge period (1975 – 1979) to reconstitute and re-imagine the world they live in. Based on sixteen months of multisited ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis will argue that the Khmer Rouge regime was a critical event (Das 1997) in Cambodian life, and as such has triggered a re-shaping of relationships between local and the national, and the national and the global, leading to new forms of social and community life and action in post Khmer Rouge Cambodia. As physical markers of violence and political instability, mass graves are inherently political and articulate these re-imaginings on the state, community, and individual level. The Cambodian state exercises and legitimates its authority by constructing modern history in reference to a narrative of liberation from the Khmer Rouge, and the ‘innocent suffering’ of Cambodia and its people, while local communities use Buddhism and animism to narrate and conceptualise the period, bringing it into expected and understandable events within Khmer Buddhist cosmology. These approaches are not necessarily in opposition to one another, but rather represent the overlapping plurality of connections with mass graves.

This thesis provides a unique exploration of social relationships to mass graves in Cambodia contributing to debates within the anthropology of politics, violence and collective memory by examining how moments of national mass violence re-shape the state and relationships within it, and how destructive periods of violence nonetheless create new fields for the imagination of the political, the religious, and the social. It also contributes to the emerging field of Cambodian ethnography that combines local considerations with wider national and geo-political discourses and how these are played out at the local level.

All work in this thesis, and all photographs presented, are my own, except where otherwise stated.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Terminology .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Cambodian Maps.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Section One: Setting the Scene .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>11</b>
The Khmer Rouge and their dead.....	14
Motivations .....	17
Literature review .....	19
Theoretical framework.....	33
What is a mass grave? .....	37
Thesis outline.....	41
<i>Section one: setting the scene .....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Section two: digging up the dead .....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Section three: grave concerns.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<b>Chapter one: Fields of death, sites of life - fieldsites and methods .....</b>	<b>46</b>
Choeung Ek.....	46
<i>Making the killing field.....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>After Democratic Kampuchea .....</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>Choeung Ek today.....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Researching at Choeung Ek.....</i>	<i>61</i>
Koh Sop .....	66
<i>During Democratic Kampuchea.....</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>After 1979.....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Koh Sop today.....</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Researching at Koh Sop.....</i>	<i>76</i>
Other sites and particular methods .....	80
<i>My position .....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Visual methods.....</i>	<i>83</i>
<i>Interviews .....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Language and the use of research assistants.....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>A note on writing .....</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>What's in a name? .....</i>	<i>93</i>



<b>Section Two: Digging up the Dead.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Chapter two: Spiritual remains - caring for the dead .....</b>	<b>95</b>
Buddhism and animism in contemporary Cambodia.....	97
The grievous dead.....	102
Care of those killed under the Khmer Rouge.....	108
<i>Care for the physical remains .....</i>	<i>108</i>
<i>Annual ritual care .....</i>	<i>115</i>
Ritual resilience.....	120
Conclusion .....	124
<b>Chapter three: Helpful dead, frightening ghosts - relationships between the living and the dead .....</b>	<b>126</b>
Theoretical background .....	128
Ghosts and spirits in Cambodia .....	134
Ethnographic case studies.....	138
<i>Rebuilding lives: the dead at Koh Sop .....</i>	<i>139</i>
<i>Rebuilding the country: the dead at Choeung Ek.....</i>	<i>148</i>
Discussion .....	153
Conclusion .....	161
<b>Chapter four: Karma and reincarnation in the killing fields .....</b>	<b>164</b>
Theoretical background .....	166
Reincarnation and karma in Khmer Buddhism .....	169
Ethnographic case studies.....	175
<i>Reintegrating the nameless dead .....</i>	<i>175</i>
<i>Repairing ruptured relations.....</i>	<i>181</i>
<i>The justice of karma and reincarnation.....</i>	<i>185</i>
Discussion .....	189
Conclusion .....	197
<b>Section Three: Grave Concerns .....</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Chapter five: Past present, present past – politics in Cambodia .....</b>	<b>201</b>
Politics in contemporary Cambodia.....	203
Raising the dead: political uses of the dead and their graves.....	209
<i>Memorialising violence, forgetting names.....</i>	<i>212</i>
<i>Resurging interest: the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia.....</i>	<i>217</i>
<i>Hierarchies of death in the written record .....</i>	<i>221</i>
Violent bodies and affective remains.....	223
Conclusion .....	230
<b>Chapter six: Haunting the future - tourism at Choeung Ek.....</b>	<b>234</b>
Theoretical background .....	236
Choeung Ek in Cambodian Tourism .....	241
Ethnographic case studies.....	247
<i>Displaying death, ensuring life.....</i>	<i>248</i>
<i>'If we forget about it, history will be erased' .....</i>	<i>253</i>
<i>Building a future by using the past.....</i>	<i>256</i>
Discussion .....	259
Conclusion .....	267

<b>Chapter seven: Dead of today, ghosts of tomorrow - elections and the spectral Khmer Rouge .....</b>	<b>270</b>
Theoretical background .....	272
Elections in Cambodia – a brief overview .....	276
Ethnographic Case Studies .....	278
<i>Spirits of the past: the ‘heroes’ of the nation</i> .....	278
<i>Spirits of the present: rallying against the opposition</i> .....	284
<i>Spirits of the future: fear and rumour</i> .....	290
Discussion .....	295
Conclusion .....	305
<b>Conclusion: Now is the Time for the Living.....</b>	<b>308</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>Appendix one: DC-Cam List of Mass Graves .....</b>	<b>341</b>

## List of Figures

Figure one: provincial boundaries (UN 2015) .....	10
Figure two: killing field distribution (CGP 2011) .....	10
Figure three: Choeung Ek stupa and displayed remains (source: the author).....	59
Figure four: Koh Sop <i>p'teah khmouch</i> (source: the author) .....	73
Figure five: farm at Koh Sop. After the regime bodies covered the land (source: the author).....	75
Figure six: Khmer Rouge remains and urns of the poor at two different pagoda (source: the author).....	112
Figure seven: depiction of <i>Pchum Benh</i> at Wat Kampong Tralach (source: the author) .....	116
Figure eight: Po Tonle stupa with remnants of <i>Cheng Meng</i> decorations (souce: the author).....	120
Figure nine: <i>Neak Ta</i> on the main road into Battambang .....	135
Figure ten: Choeung Ek killing tree (source: the author) .....	246
Figure eleven: human remains emerging at Choeung Ek (source: the author) ....	251
Figure twelve: Khmer Rouge tourism at Phnom Sampeau (source: the author) ..	264
Figure thirteen: Khmer Rouge re-enactment at Choeung Ek remembrance event (souce: the author) .....	281
Figure fourteen: protestors at rally against Kem Sokha, June 2013 (source: the author) .....	288
Figure fifteen: Protestors listen to speeches in front of the <i>cheddei</i> of remains (source: the author).....	290

## List of Abbreviations

CGDK:	Coalition Party of Democratic Kampuchea
CNRP:	Cambodia National Rescue Party
CPK:	Communist Party of Kampuchea, colloquially known as the Khmer Rouge
CPP:	Cambodian Peoples Party
DC-Cam:	The Documentation Centre of Cambodia
DK:	Democratic Kampuchea (1976 – 1979)
ECCC:	The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge Trials/Tribunal)
FUNCINPEC:	Front Uni National Pour Un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif
FUNSK:	Front Uni National pour le Salut de Kampuchéa (in English UFNSK)
KR:	Khmer Rouge
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
PRK:	People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979 – 1989)
S-21:	Security Centre 21, which included Tuol Sleng, Prey Sar and Takhmao prisons, and the killing site of Choeung Ek (nowadays S-21 is used almost exclusively to refer to Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh)
SOC:	State of Cambodia (1989 – 1993)
UN:	United Nations
UNTAC:	United Nations Transitional Authority
US:	United States of America

## Terminology

<b>Ângkar:</b>	‘The Organisation.’ <i>Ângkar</i> was the term the Khmer Rouge gave to themselves, and by which they are still known by many people.
<b>aPot:</b>	‘The Pol Pots.’ The colloquial name used in Cambodia to refer to members of the Khmer Rouge.
<b>Democratic Kampuchea:</b>	The name given to Cambodia by the Communist Party of Kampuchea from 1976 – 1979. Although it formally only includes the time period above, I use the term in this thesis to refer to the entire period of the Khmer Rouge rule (April 17 <sup>th</sup> 1975 – January 7 <sup>th</sup> 1979).
<b>Khmer:</b>	The Cambodian word for Cambodian language, but also used to refer to all things Cambodian (i.e. Khmer people, Khmer history and so on). Throughout this thesis, Khmer and Cambodian are used interchangeably.
<b>Khmer Rouge:</b>	Members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). The name was first given to comrades of the CPK by the Cambodian Head of State, King Norodom Sihanouk, but was quickly adopted by the international community of Cambodia and exported as people began leaving Cambodia in the early 1970s. The Khmer Rouge is often used interchangeably with Democratic Kampuchea to refer to their whole period of rule.
<b>Killing Site:</b>	An area where executions were conducted – during Democratic Kampuchea these were always concomitant with gravesites and usually very close to security centres. Most contain multiple mass grave pits and large numbers of dead.
<b>Mass Grave:</b>	Sites in which multiple graves exist, all resulting from the policies and practices of the Khmer Rouge regime.
<b>Samay aPot:</b>	‘The Time of Pol Pot.’ A colloquial Khmer name for Democratic Kampuchea.
<b>Year Zero:</b>	1975, as renamed by the Khmer Rouge to assert their re-invention of Cambodia.

## Cambodian Maps



Figure one: provincial boundaries (UN 2015)

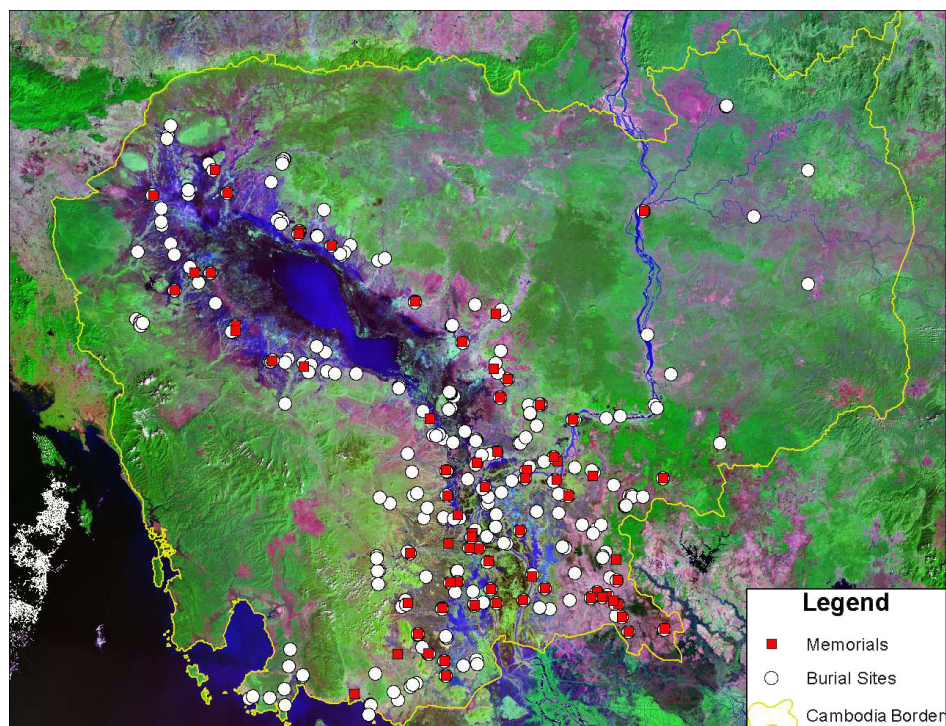


Figure two: killing field distribution (CGP 2011)

## Section One: Setting the Scene

### Introduction

The dead, we don't even know where they were killed. There are so many of them in the countryside. Everywhere. Uncountable. Now all we can see is a mountain of bones.

*- Ta, on those killed by the Khmer Rouge*

\*\*\*\*\*

Mass graves litter Cambodia's landscape. Material traces of the brutal Maoist Khmer Rouge regime that ruled from 1975 to 1979, they are remainders of its violence now inscribed on the landscape. No-one knows exactly how many people died, nor how many mass graves exist, and it is unlikely that precise numbers will ever be determined. With so many years gone by, many of the graves have been re-integrated into the landscape; years of farming have destroyed many bodies; those exposed have disintegrated or been lost; those lying in unpopulated or difficult to access areas may never be uncovered<sup>1</sup>. Most authors settle on a figure of 1.7 million dead, and over 19,000 mass graves, but the reality could be far more extensive or much reduced. What is clear, however, is that the death and devastation caused by the regime was staggering, and that its impact continues. As material markers of the regime, mass graves make visible the way narratives of the Khmer Rouge regime are being used to shape

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Cambodian soil is highly acidic, and bodies are therefore likely to decompose more rapidly than in other locations (Blair and Blair 2014).

contemporary Cambodia, providing a lens through which to examine how the violence of that regime is negotiated, and how the period is being used to 're-make' the country today.

This thesis examines how people in contemporary Cambodia use the Khmer Rouge period, and particularly the space of mass graves, to inform and shape their lives today. Starting from Katherine Verdery's (1996, 2000) argument that dead bodies are inherently political, I will extend this to include the spaces they inhabit - the landscapes, graves and memorials in which they lie - examining how the mass graves are used in contemporary discourse (locally, nationally and internationally) and through that, how the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge period are experienced in the present. This approach is supported by a consideration of Jonathan Spencer's (2007) concept of 'the political,' which argues that there is an irreducibly political dimension to everyday life, particularly in the re-imagination of life and community after conflict, and Veena Das's (1997) theory of 'critical events,' through which I will examine how the Khmer Rouge regime has triggered a re-shaping of relationships between the local and the national, and the national and the global, leading to new forms of social and community life and action in post Khmer Rouge Cambodia. This provokes a re-imagining and redefinition of traditional categories and understandings of social life, which gives new ways of imagining and creating the state and its people. As physical markers of violence and political instability, mass graves articulate and make visible these re-imaginings on the state, community, and individual level. In this thesis I explore these differing presentations, examining how although state, local, and individual connections and uses of the sites are intertwined, the differing needs for each leads to a plurality of connections with the graves. The Cambodian state exercises and legitimates its authority by constructing modern history in reference to a



narrative of liberation from the Khmer Rouge, and the 'innocent suffering' of Cambodia and its people. Contrary to state presentations about the loss of life during this period, however, I show how most Khmer have today reintegrated those killed under the regime through encounters with ghosts and spirits, and via reincarnation. Encounters with the mass graves and their dead make visible how everyday Cambodians currently narrate and understand the Khmer Rouge regime in terms of Buddhist cosmology, through the use of concepts such as reincarnation and karma.

Based on sixteen months fieldwork, with two main fieldsites (Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, a mass grave of up to 17,000 people - now a national memorial and international tourist site, and a site I call Koh Sop, the killing and grave site of up to 7,000 people - now a rural farming village) and with multi-sited research at fifteen other sites in Cambodia, my research contributes to debates within the anthropology of politics, violence and collective memory by examining how moments of national mass violence re-shape the state and relationships within it, and how destructive periods of violence nonetheless create new fields for the imagination of the political, the religious, and the social. It also contributes to the emerging field of Cambodian ethnography that combines local considerations with wider national and geo-political discourses and how these are played out at the local level.

This introduction will briefly introduce the Khmer Rouge regime, before moving on to discuss my motivations for this project. The relevant literature on which this thesis draws will be considered, before moving on to outline in greater detail the overall theoretical approach for the thesis. I will examine what constitutes a mass

grave in Cambodia, before finally presenting the overall thesis structure and chapter descriptions.

## **The Khmer Rouge and their dead**

Let me start from a moment that changed the course of Cambodian life; April 17th, 1975. On that day, after years of fighting in the forests and mountains of rural Cambodia, the Communist Party of Cambodia (nicknamed the Khmer Rouge, a corruption of the French *Khmers Rouges*, a title given to them by Cambodia's former ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk) took control of the country. Much of the population welcomed them as they marched into the capital Phnom Penh (Chandler 2008b) because they signaled a potential end to years of suffering and conflict: decades of struggle against colonization; violent civil struggles throughout the 1960s and 70s; Lon Nol's aggressive regime following the military coup that had overthrown Sihanouk in 1970<sup>2</sup> in which up to 600,000 died (Chomsky and Herman 1979); and extensive US bombing between 1965 and 1973 in which over 2.7 million tonnes of bombs were dropped and unknown numbers of Cambodians killed<sup>3</sup> (Owen and Kiernan 2006). The clock was re-set; the year 1975 was now known as Year Zero, and in 1976 the country was renamed Democratic Kampuchea.

The Khmer Rouge regime devastated the country. Their Maoist revolution, aimed at creating a new Cambodia - self-sufficient and independent of external powers - included urban evacuation, collectivization, the destruction of nearly all state

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<sup>2</sup> The Lon Nol regime was sponsored and supported by the U.S, who sent military aid to the country during its five years in power, including a bombing offensive from February to August 1973 in which over half a million tonnes of munitions were dropped (Owen and Kiernan 2006).

<sup>3</sup> To give some scale to this, this is more bombs than the Allies dropped during the entire Second World War, including the nuclear bombs at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which weighed 20,000 and 15,000 tonnes respectively (ibid.: 67).

institutions, and complete repression of the population. Following their victory they immediately emptied the cities, sending people into the countryside to work on massive projects designed to bring about an idealised agrarian nation<sup>4</sup>: to make way for this they disbanded the old life, destroying (though not annihilating) customary forms of family life, religion, education, healthcare and law. In their place they installed a new life: communal living and eating; forced, arranged marriages; no religion or ritual; no healthcare; and education through work.

Nobody knows exactly how many people died in the three years, eight months and twenty days the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, nor how many of those who perished were executed rather than dying from disease or starvation. The death toll has provoked much debate over the years, with estimates ranging from the most conservative 740,800 (Vickery 1984), to the most liberal 3.4 million (Heuveline 1998).<sup>5</sup> Most authors now settle on a figure around 1.7 million (DC-Cam 2012; Guillou 2013; Hinton 2005; Kiernan 2003), reporting it to be around one third of the population at the time. Because of the continuing uncertainty of the data, I do not use a specific number in this thesis. What is certain is that the death toll was huge, and the effect devastating.

The bodies of those who perished were buried or abandoned in mass graves across the country; many thousands of mass graves in many hundreds of

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<sup>4</sup> Some have argued that the Khmer Rouge were anti-progress (Chiot 1994, Salter 2000), aiming to return Cambodia to be like Angkor: a pre-industrial era between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, whilst they used Angkor as an example, it was their production levels they wanted to simulate: Angkor was Cambodia's golden age when Cambodia was influential across the region. The Khmer Rouge, however, were heavily industrialized. As James Tyner (2014) argues, the projects they conducted indicate large-scale industrialisation and extensive administration. In the short period they ruled they managed the construction of huge dams, extensive canal systems, airports, and large-scale, meticulously planned, farming regimes. Not, it would seem, a regime wishing to return to pre-industrialisation.

<sup>5</sup> A good critique of the primary attempts to calculate the death toll is given by Bruce Sharp's article *Counting Hell* (Sharp 2008).

locations.<sup>6</sup> The methods of disposal were varied: in some locations the Khmer Rouge used already existing features such as caves, rivers, and wells to dispose of the bodies. In some areas pits were dug and corpses buried, in others they were left scattered across the surface of the fields and forests in which they were killed - it was this sight that led journalist Dith Pran to coin the term 'the Killing Fields' to describe his encounter on his escape across Cambodia to Thailand (Schanberg 1985).<sup>7</sup> In most areas the graves were simply a means to dispose of the increasing numbers of dead, but in some the dead were put to work: fertilising rice fields or coconut groves.<sup>8</sup> When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 to put an end to the regime, they found a trail of death as they moved through the country. They quickly put the physical evidence of the devastation of the regime to work, collecting the dead that lay on the surface, digging up others, and erecting memorials displaying the dead. Local people, meanwhile, looted the graves searching for valuables. Beyond these initial disturbances, however, the majority of the graves have never been excavated, and the dead remain in the ground

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<sup>6</sup> Estimates exist but are widely variable for the number of graves and killing sites across Cambodia. Even overall figures given by researchers and reports from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) / Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University (CGP), which mapped the graves in a ten year project, do not agree. CGP (2012) lists 309 killing sites, Craig Etcheson (one of the founders of the project) reports 432 (2005: 111), whilst the inventory of mass graves produced by DC-Cam, last updated in 2008, lists 390 locations (DC-Cam 2005). The same applies to number of mass grave pits: CGP lists an estimated 19,000, Craig Etcheson 20,492, and the DC-Cam inventory does not actually provide a total figure, because at some sites the numbers were inestimable, although the website hosting the list reports 19,733.

<sup>7</sup> This term is so evocative of the extent of violent killing, and disregard of the dead that it is now used contemporaneously and retrospectively to describe genocide and crimes against humanity in locations and events across the globe, including Biafra (Oguibe 1998), Sri Lanka (Arunatilake, Jayasuriya and Kelegama 2001), Indonesia (Lemelson 2009), and Iraq (Scheer 2006) to name but a few.

<sup>8</sup> The advantages of having decomposing bodies in the soil were noted long after the downfall of Democratic Kampuchea. On chatting about the experience of living on top of graves in the village where I worked, Om Yay and Om Srey laughed about the benefits it had given: '[the land] became luckier because [it] is very fertile: whatever we grew, all was good.' At another site a farmer, whose rice field lay across several burial pits, lamented that now he had to buy fertilizer, which is expensive, whereas in the past the rice grew well because of the 'natural' fertilizer in the soil (the human remains).

across Cambodia. The graves have been returned to everyday living space: houses, farms, markets, shops, and roads, all built on top of mass graves. Very few memorials exist; those built under the Vietnamese administration have largely been neglected, and the few new ones that exist are mostly funded by internationally backed NGOS or high-ranking business people and government officials. This thesis examines these mass graves and relationships to the dead that lie within them.

By the time I got to Cambodia in 2012, the Democratic Kampuchea was 33 years behind us, and the Khmer Rouge regime, although still present in the imaginary of Cambodia, had not been active for 15 years. Their violence, however, remains to date, not least in the numbers of those who died during the regime; not once did I meet anyone who had not lost one, if not several, members of their family, friends and colleagues. Even those born after the regime were subject to the ruptures in kin networks that the death of nearly a third of the population causes. The violence and its effects however, no longer rage; they are sporadic, episodic, and related to specific provocations, as this thesis will show.

## **Motivations**

People have often asked me what brought me to this research. Why graves, and mass ones at that? I have no personal knowledge comparable to that experienced by my informants who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime and the troubled years that enveloped it, or that compares to the structural and symbolic violence suffered by many Khmer people in contemporary Cambodia. I have, however, been amidst mass death and mass graves for many years. Prior to my PhD I worked as a forensic anthropologist specialising in the identification of human

remains from mass graves, first in Bosnia-Herzegovina with remains of the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, and then in Iraq on graves resulting from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. It was this latter position that brought me to this thesis. My experiences in Iraq led to question the ethics and efficacy of international interventions, and the use and manipulation of mass graves in the geo-political sphere and in the formation of states. This practical work with the graves, which I had entered wide-eyed and idealistic, complete with ethno-centric notions of justice and healing, led me to question what mass graves are: who they serve and for what purpose. It became clear that the graves and the dead belong to those who claim them the loudest, which varies on the politics of the day.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina graves were initially unearthed to find evidence for ICTY – the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. These bodies were used to provide evidence of violence but not, initially, identified. For years after the tribunal they remained stacked in body bags with no further attention. Families were seeking their missing, however, and over the years, pressure built until identification, not evidence, became the order of the day. But like all bodies resulting from violence or disaster, these bodies remained sites of political power; their unearthing a symbol of solidarity, but also a signifier (and sometimes a catalyst) of ongoing tension. In Iraq the graves were unearthed by the new government, trained by US funded aid programmes. Each sought evidence of atrocities to validate their position; the coalition's 'intervention;' the new government's succession. Both were supported by ongoing media presentations of the terror of Saddam Hussein.

I went to Cambodia trying to compare the way graves were viewed and treated there to my experiences of graves in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq. Why did most

graves remain unearthed in Cambodia? Did families seek the remains of their lost kin? If not, why not? How was it that these sites, which in living memory saw such atrocities and hold its results, from which skeletal remains still emerge, have apparently become benign? These, and many more questions besides, led me to Cambodia and its graves; I wanted to address, as well, wider questions about mass graves and their use in politics. I found many similarities between the uses of the graves in Cambodia and elsewhere: in the political appropriation of sites; in the use of the anonymous dead in narrative manipulation; in the aesthetics of death that are used for various political endeavours. But I also found many differences, a key one being how the dead are involved in the lives of the living and the place that socio-religious practices enabled the narration of the past in the present.

## **Literature review**

The relevant literature for each chapter is reviewed there; however, in order to situate the thesis within the wider academy, this section provides a brief overview of anthropological literature on mass graves, mass death, and Cambodia.

Mass graves lend themselves to a political consideration, particularly those resulting from conflict and violence. The result of political action, they are also open to political manipulation and the harnessing for political ends once their construction is complete. However, until recently their consideration within academic literature has mostly concentrated on the practical aspects of their investigation; how to overcome particular difficulties presented by them and approaches to investigation and identification in different contexts (for example Adams and Byrd 2008; Blau and Ubelaker 2008; Cox et al. 2007; Cox 2003; Komar

and Buikstra 2007). This practical focus pays little attention to the socio-cultural aspects of mass graves, despite their capacity to act as highly politicized locations of social memory, as 'powerful reservoir[s] of traumatic memory' (Denich 1994: 367), as locations of identity formation and consolidation (Parker Pearson 1999), as potential sites of conflict and tension stagnation (Bax 1997), or producers of social relations (Ferrandiz and Baer 2008).

Work that has started to emerge on mass graves in the socio-cultural literature primarily centres on their unearthing and their relationship to 'the missing.' The missing of Cyprus, Paul Sant Cassia (2005) asserts, epitomise a time-old theme in Western literature and culture: the unburied dead (both literally and metaphorically) whose liminal status leaves them open for politicisation and contested control between the state and the individual; and, ultimately, by researchers, as they try to approach an understanding of their realities, because every person is 'engaged in the theatrics and secrets of power' and 'we are inevitably complicit in the realities we are trying to describe' (2005: 224 – 225). But rather than an opposition between the dehumanised, collective gaze of the state, and the personal and individual gaze of the community, control of the dead may be done by both (Verdery 1999, 2002). Modern technology can unite the two, and bring the global in to the mix as well. When considering the use of DNA-technology in the identification of the missing from Srebrenica's 1995 massacre Sarah Wagner (2008) shows that the fate of the missing is a negotiation between individuals, communities, and the state, and its administration, though contested, may be unifying. Identifying the dead sends them home to their kin. It also, however, brings them back 'into the embrace of the state' (ibid: 255), whilst simultaneously providing the opportunity for 'social reconstruction' by Western



governments (ibid: 8); a site at which they can rebuild post-conflict Balkans.<sup>9</sup> DNA, Wagner writes, offers a technology of repair, but only, she points out, for those deemed worthy of such; those with lives (or rather deaths) worth knowing for political ends (biopolitics for the dead; those with grievable lives (Butler 2010)).

The missing in Spain, Jerez-Farrán and Amago (2010: 1) assert are 'living mementoes of the power of the dead to speak beyond language as they mutely remind the nation of the crimes perpetrated.' Through the dead, and their graves, the Spanish civil war intrudes on the present, and their exhumations break the 'screen of silence [that] has surrounded Spain's mass graves' (ibid: 307). But this silence, Layla Renshaw contends (2011: 31) is a pact, not a conspiracy as Jerez-Farrán and Amago suggest; it is 'both a self- and mutually enforced condition of censorship across the political spectrum.' The dead and their graves materialise the past in the present, but this materialisation is shaped by the indices of the dead before they are exposed. This bears much resonance with contemporary Cambodia, and I appreciate the way Renshaw engages with the different frames of reference that collide at excavation. But she essentialises trauma and normalises it as the affective result of encounters with Franco's regime, as well as assuming the necessity of individual identification<sup>10</sup>. She also asserts that the organisation exhuming the dead, the AHRM<sup>11</sup>, does not have a coherent approach to the political content of commemoration because they

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<sup>9</sup> And (I always felt when I was there) the unearthing of graves and identification of remains, paid for mostly by western governments, provided a means by which they could symbolically atone for the neglect of that small enclave of Srebrenica, a neglect which led to the execution of nearly 9,000 men and boys; the rape of hundreds of women.

<sup>10</sup> When older people she interviewed told her they felt no need for individual identification or burial beyond the collective she comments 'the explanatory meeting and the reburial ceremony seemed highly effective in overcoming this resistance to the *necessity* of individualising the body' (Renshaw 2011: 128, my italics).

<sup>11</sup> Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Historica.

devolve it to the families (ibid: 231), overlooking that this in itself is a political manoeuvre, one that legitimates kin over state as the owners of the dead.

But the missing is a particular category of person, defined entirely by absence, and resting on an assumption that they can (and should) be returned, both physically and metaphorically, to the state and kin from which they come. They are 'undead' and therefore a threat; a challenge; an entity in need of repatriation, of reconciliation, of reparation. Nor are the missing silent. They are, rather, multi-vocal. Even before they are located and unearthed they speak for their kin; their country; or whoever else claims them: the international organisations that unearth and repatriate their bodies; the governments that fund searches, identifications, memorials; others who use them as metaphors to materialise other violences in the world. The dead in the graves that litter Cambodia are not, however, missing. Though identities are absent from the physical remains, and though some people still look for their (living) relatives; these dead are present – physically and imaginatively – in everyday encounters and political realities. They may never die because of this. They are not silent, though their voices may be muffled. And like the missing of Spain, many are more alive than dead though for differing reasons.

The anthropological record shows us how in many social systems the dead can only be properly re-integrated into the lives of the living through structured rituals of death and mourning. Van Gennep's (1960 [1908]: 160) classic study on rites of passage shows how those that are not properly integrated become the unhappy dead: troubled and troublesome until they can be appropriately reintegrated. Across much of Asia the unhappy dead become malevolent spirits, causing misfortune, illness and death (Bertrand 2001; Bovensiepen 2009; Chouléan 1986;

Dernbach 2005; Formoso 1996). In areas of Eastern Europe vampires are considered to result from such dead (duBoulay 1982). In parts of Euro-America 'they are apt to become haunting ghosts trapped on the human plane' (Bennett 2014: 243). Gabrielle Schwab (2010: 78) sums it up in her exploration of trans-generational trauma, stating that:

The dead who were denied the rite of burial, who died an unnatural death, who committed or were the victim of a crime, or who suffered an unbearable justice come back to haunt the living.

Social stability, therefore, rests upon appropriate treatment of the dead, managed through rituals, which function as catalysts of processes that enable the re-imagining of social networks and re-establishment of stability following the rupture that death causes (Rosaldo 1989). However, it is not only social stability, but also the continuation of life that the management of death enables, as illustrated in Bloch and Parry's volume *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (1982). Death is often intrinsically linked with fertility, as Bloch and Parry's volume shows, but funeral rituals used to control the dead also control the symbolism inherent in the creation of the established social order. Death ruptures the social fabric that life is based on, Hertz (1960) asserts (being one of the first to argue that death is not only biological, but also a social process), and Bloch and Parry argue that these tears can only be repaired with socially sanctioned and appropriate rituals and manners of behaviour. The social control over death via mortuary rituals brings its arbitrariness into correct order and allows for 'rebirth': not only of people and plants, but also of society. Bad death threatens this order, not only because of the potential intrusion into the lives of the living by the dead, but also because of this threat to life.

But who deals with deaths when they are not individual but collective and the result of societal violence? Who can reintegrate them in to social life and how is this managed? Is their integration dependent on unearthing and identification? Does their death without ceremony cause social unrest with a need for reprisal? Heonik Kwon, who has worked extensively on the legacy of conflict in Korea (Kwon and Chung 2014) and Vietnam (2006, 2008a, 2008b), focuses specifically on how people use the physical and spiritual remains of both to (re)construct life afterwards. His work asks such questions as who owns the dead and who can claim them? How do spirits and ghosts allow people to narrate their social lives and aspirations, and the specific historical periods from which they derive? Are spiritual encounters about morality or memory?

In Vietnam, Kwon argues (2006) there is a 'bi-polarity' of death: a moral dichotomy between different types of death and the dead that differs between the state, individuals, and even transnational forces that are interested in them, and which is the space of contested value systems. This causes problems in the post-conflict world, where different voices try to claim their authority and ownership of the dead, who transcend the usual boundaries of ancestor, ghost and hero by belonging to several categories; sometimes contemporaneously; sometimes at different times. The meaning ascribed to these dead, and the modes of acknowledging them has changed over time, and remains flexible today. This is partly because the deaths suffered during the conflicts in Vietnam required a refashioning of traditional family rituals to bring the dead into the embrace of the home and the family, and thus their correct time. Understanding how these dead, most particularly the ghosts, are encountered and conceptualised is integral to understanding the political situation of the living, Kwon (2008) asserts, because

as socially salient beings, they are integral to how social life is constructed in contemporary Vietnam.

In Korea meanwhile, those buried in mass graves resulting from South Korean state violence against its own people (in an attempt to erase those deemed communist sympathizers or potential collaborators with North Korea), highlight how the dead, entwined both physically and metaphorically, unite families in their attempts to restore their moral legitimacy through proper reburial as ancestors, and by doing so, provide a means for the living to re-assert their own moral status, because they are related to the dead through a consideration of 'associative guilt' (Kwon 2015). Constructing communal gravesites and gravestones to commemorate them, Kwon argues (2015: 87), is an effort, therefore, not only towards care of the dead, but also in the hope to further civil and human rights in wider society.

Are mass graves records of a violent and traumatic history (to both individuals and the nation) that continue to have negative effects on the population in contemporary times? Discourses on painful memory, which have held recent fascination for many anthropologists working in areas of conflict, violence, human rights abuses, or disaster (Das, Kleinman and Lock 1997; Das et al. 2000; Das et al. 2001), might assume so. This is because 'over the last 25 years, trauma has become established as a unique way of appropriating the traces of history and one of the dominant modes of representing our relationship with the past' (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 15). The assumption that events such as war and disaster are both individually and collectively traumatic, and that both individuals and whole societies experiencing such events are automatically victims, 'scarred' both mentally and physically, is central to these discourses. These traumas are argued

to connect people and societies to particular histories, and provide particular frames for that history; and 'victims of trauma' have become 'the very embodiment of our common humanity' (Fassin & Rechtman 2009: 23): people who represent the universal experience of suffering (LeCapra 2001).<sup>12</sup> The universal applicability and understanding of these concepts is, however, contestable; recent literature (for example Fassin 2008; Fassin and d'Halluin 2007; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Rechtman 2000; Rechtman 2006; Summerfield 1999; Summerfield 2001) shows how these concepts evolved in particular socio-historic circumstances of the past century, within histories of hierarchy and inequality. The assumptions behind their application should be examined carefully before being applied outside the Euro-American zone, where, Summerfield (2001) argues, they can become a form of Western domination.

However, these discourses remain stuck to mass graves and their investigation. 'Exhumations,' forensic anthropologist William Haglund (2001) wrote, 'reconfirm the dignity of the victims and the value of human rights.' 'Not to bring the dead into the sanctuary of truth-memory-justice is to annihilate them a second time' William Booth (2001: 691) agreed. Justice does not necessarily equate to excavation, although usually this is implied. Some authors suggest justice is added by their exposition of the remains and the documentation of exhumations. *Dark is the Room Where We Sleep* (Bourke and Torres 2007) for example, a

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<sup>12</sup> Contemporaneously, the term Post-traumatic Stress Disorder has become virtually synonymous with survival in cases of public violence and disaster; Summerfield (2001: 95) goes so far as to consider it to be 'totemic': in much the same way as bodies within a mass grave are often used as evidence of human rights atrocities, the diagnosis of PTSD is now used as an emblem of invisible, ongoing damage to the social fabric. This is illustrated by studies such as Breslau (2000) on globalised discourses of suffering in Japan following the Kobe earthquake of 1995, where a scarcity of PTSD diagnoses were argued by psychological professionals to indicate a psychologically immature culture rather than a difference in cultural understandings and applications of psychiatry, and DeJong *et al.* (2000) whose study of adults in Freetown, Sierra Leone, diagnosed an astonishing 99% of their sample of 245 randomly selected adults to have PTSD.

collaboration between anthropology and photography (the photography documenting the process of excavation, the anthropology collecting oral histories from relatives and friends) seeks justice by making visible Spanish mass graves and the voices they contain. *The Graves* (Peress, Stover and Goldstone 1998) does the same for the unearthing of remains at Vukovar and Srebrenica: the result of conflict, and geopolitical action and inaction in the Balkans. Photographs of twisted corpses and shattered people interspersed with quotes that show the devastation speak, apparently, in the name of justice: 'Forgetting is unthinkable' Peress *et al.* write (1998: 328) because 'it would be a dishonor [sic] to the dead and their memory.'

But who classifies what honour and memory are? Does exhibiting their photographs and other evidence of atrocities (such as the human remains that they resulted in) achieve anything beyond voyeurism? In relation to Cambodia, Michelle Caswell (2014), Rachel Hughes (2008), and Susan Linfield (2010) claim that the photographic exhibitions of those tortured and sentenced to execution during the Khmer Rouge regime at Tuol Sleng museum in Phnom Penh, and the remains displayed at Choeung Ek, achieve far more. Those visiting them, Caswell argues, become witnesses to the horror and suffering. People attending such displays, Hughes (2008: 327) asserts, are able to 'participate in global humanitarianism'. By 'witnessing' Linfield (2010) writes, we provide justice to the dead, to their families, to their nations. But these claims are Manichean and full of power and privilege. Several authors critique regimes that use the dead to legitimate their rule, or as modes of propaganda to materialise particular narratives (Caplan 2007; Guyer 2009; O'Sullivan 2001), but do such depictions of the dead in text not do the same?

A recent publication worthy of consideration is Ferrándiz and Robben's (2015) edited volume *Necropolitics: mass graves and exhumations in the Age of Human Rights*. This book explores the political and social implications of mass grave investigation, covering exhumations from Latin America, Asia, and Europe. In Chile and Argentina, Robben (2015) argues, exhumations perform 'counter-visibility' – in uncovering the disappeared they not only return identities to the missing, identities stolen by the state, but in doing so expose the visibility of life and death manipulated by each authoritarian sovereignty's necropolitical and territorial power. Ferrándiz (2015: 115) conceives of a 'transnational dignifying route' of commemoration, created through the interaction of different people at excavations in Spain: relatives, public authorities, and international agencies are involved, enabling the creation of social relations and networks of support that relates to the global expansion of human rights discourses and practice.

The effect of violent conflict lingers for decades, Sarah Wagner writes, and 'binds generations in degrees of grief' (2015: 134). Communal burials complicate familial obligations, which must be re-imagined in the aftermath of war. In Korea Kwon (2015) argues, these re-imagined links perform civil and human rights (see above). They also enable resistance to hegemonic silence (Stefatos and Kovras 2015), and a potential avenue for reconciliation (Rojas-Perez 2015). However, once exhumed, human remains resulting from conflict often still belong to the state and are used in assertion of political rule, as well as struggles to manage memory. Lesley (2015) explores this in relation to Cambodia and Rwanda, arguing that the display of remains in both locations, and individual's incorporation of state narratives related to this displays attempts to build national narratives, and thus stability, where social life was ruptured.



These approaches to mass graves and the mass dead provide much food for thought, however, none seemed entirely appropriate as a means to approach those in Cambodia. The Khmer people I encountered did not present themselves as victims of trauma. The Khmer Rouge period was seen as a terrible history, but as one belonging to a particular time and context, except where it is usefully harnessed in the present or its memory provoked by some event. The graves are not traumatic spaces, nor the remains they contain entities of horror (though they are of violence).

Although the graves were subject to an extensive mapping project by the Cambodian Genocide Project with DC-Cam (Etcheson 2000; DC-Cam 2005; CGP 2010) (the methodology and findings of which are deeply flawed<sup>13</sup>), the mapping was in order to collate evidence of the extent of Democratic Kampuchea's violence, and until recently the mass graves have received relatively scant other attention.

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<sup>13</sup> Estimates of number of grave pits and number of victims relied on witness reporting, depending on memory and estimated figures, some over 20 years after the event. Reports were corroborated by others compiled during the PRK (largely considered inaccurate – people were double counted and in their ambition of proving genocidal massacres, over-reporting was common (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2004)) or by visits to the sites when researchers looked at the site and guesstimated number of pits and bodies within them. Not all sites were visited: some figures relied only on witness statements, which were taken as fact. No test trenches were dug to confirm the presence of human remains. Each research trip lasted only a few days during which several sites were visited, leaving little time for in depth research. Researchers presumed uniformity to the graves that evidence does not support. The project omitted many graves, including those created before 1975 and after 1979, graves from hospitals, and graves of contemporary political value. Not all districts were mapped. Some sites appear on regional reports but not on the final report. The final report duplicates others. Reports by researchers about the findings do not agree with one another on number of pits or dead (CGP 2011; DC-Cam 2012; Etcheson 2000, 2005). A quick glance at witness statements shows the general nature of their estimates: 'he testified that one evening at 7:00 pm he watched as 20 thousand people were tied, shackled, and carried away... He said the victims had been told that they were being carried to Thailand but in fact they were all taken to be killed. So, the site of killing at Chamkar Khnol, Wat Chamkar Khnol was presumed to contain more than 20,000 victims (approximately 25,000);' 'The pits far from the hump could not be counted because there are too many to count. It is estimated that there are from 500 to 1,000 pits.' One grave was reported as being 200m long; another site apparently executed more than 500,000 people (13% of the Khmer population at the time). Despite these issues, somehow Craig Etcheson determined the outrageously precise estimation of 1,112,829 victims of execution and 20,492 mass grave pits (Etcheson 2005). To try and clear up some of the issues with the data, I requested access to the original reports, but was told they could not be found, or maybe no longer existed, and the only information remaining from these extensive trips are the short summaries available online.

An exception in anthropology is Anne Yvonne Guillou, who has published several articles about both (Guillou 2012a, 2012b, 2013), and I will return to her work in the appropriate chapters. However, to approach the graves from only an anthropological perspective is somewhat limiting, particularly as the majority of work comes from outside the discipline. Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek have received a great deal of literary attention, though primarily from their positions as historical archives and tourist sites (Chandler 2008c; Ledgerwood 1997; Violi 2012; Williams 2004; Bickford 2009; Sion 2011; Hughes 2005). The position of these two sites as tourist destinations (chapter six) as well as memorial sites in active use by the state, makes them attractive sites for research, however, this focused attention has the effect of rendering invisible other mass grave and killing sites, particularly those that provide contestations to the state-sponsored narratives these two sites perform. Tyner *et al.* (2012) address the gap in coverage by examining two unmarked sites: Sre Lieu mass grave at Koh Sla Dam, and the Kampong Chhnang Airfield. That paper is an extension of other work by James Tyner (2012a; 2012b), who examines the political use of space in controlling imagined and presented narratives of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, arguing that memory and knowledge of the regime is tightly controlled by the current government and its international supporters, partly through selective national memorialisation of specific mass graves across the entire country.

The lack of social consideration of the graves is not extended to the Khmer Rouge regime itself. The Cambodian Genocide Project (2010), the work of Chandler (1999; 2008), Etcheson (2005), Hinton (1996; 1998; 2005; 2011), Kiernan (2003; 2006; 2007; 2008), Locard (1993, 2004), Vickery (1984), and others besides, seek not only to map the events and outcomes of the genocide, but also to offer explanations of the dynamics and particular circumstances that enabled the deaths to occur. These

works provide comprehensive debates to the causes of the regime and life during it, however, Tegelberg (2009: 496) argues that this causes a simplistic rendering of Khmer subjects as victims or perpetrators of the period, rather than acknowledging the complexity of the situation and with little focus until recently on contemporary Cambodia, lacking are narratives giving voice to people's everyday lives, which has the direct effect of rendering these invisible (Guillou 2013; Tegelberg 2009).

This evolves, primarily, from the scarcity of ethnographic studies of Cambodia. Prior to the conflict few anthropologists worked in Cambodia, and even today, the number is limited<sup>14</sup>. One exception is May Ebihara (1968), whose doctoral thesis, *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, is held as an exemplar of rural Khmer ethnography.<sup>15</sup> Also researching there before 1975 was French ethnologist Francois Bizot, who worked on the rural practice of Buddhism<sup>16</sup> (1973, 1976, 1981) and Porée-Maspero (1962) who studied ritual practice and tradition across the country. After the expulsion of foreigners from Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge in 1975, anthropologists did not return to Cambodia until the 1990s. At that time interest largely focused on the regime and its affects. Alexander Laban Hinton (2005) worked with Khmer Rouge perpetrators, asking *Why Did They Kill?* and has continued his work over the years focusing on violence and genocide by the regime (Hinton 1998, 2002, 2008, 2011). Ebihara returned to Cambodia with her student Judy Ledgerwood, and examined the impact of the regime on the village she had

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<sup>14</sup> As I undertook fieldwork in Cambodia only two other students came from anthropology: Tallyn Gray, whose thesis explores transitional justice (2014), and Paul Christensen who provides a rare exception in Khmer ethnography: his research centres on the social dynamics of spirit mediums and their spirits across contemporary Cambodia with little focus on the Khmer Rouge.

<sup>15</sup> Ebihara is one of the few scholars to have worked long-term in Cambodia before and after the Khmer Rouge, and her later work provides interesting comparatives because of that.

<sup>16</sup> In 1971 while studying Buddhist practice in rural Cambodia, Bizot was imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. He was the only known Westerner captured by the regime to have survived. Following the Khmer Rouge expulsion of foreigners in 1975 he left Cambodia, and returned only to testify at the trial of Duch in the ECCC.

first conducted research (Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Ebihara 2002).

Ledgerwood continued her interest in Cambodia, giving some attention to the regime (Ledgerwood and Un 2003; Ledgerwood 1997), but also exploring wider anthropological topics, such as rural life, ritual and religion (Ledgerwood 1995, 1998, 2008). Peggy LeVine (2010) examined weddings and births during Democratic Kampuchea, coining the term 'ritualcide' to describe the Khmer Rouge's attempts to destroy the underlying social and religious security of the population by destruction of rituals. John Marston's interest is in religion and community (Marston 2011; Marston 2006), while Alexandra Kent examines religion's place in the rebuilding of Cambodia and the re-establishment of the 'moral order' (Kent 2003, 2006, 2011; Kent and Chandler 2008). Eve Zucker (2009, 2011, 2013) also bases her work in the moral economy; examining moralities of remembrance in Upland Cambodia.<sup>17</sup>

By continually focusing on the Khmer Rouge, the narrative of Cambodian history is limited to that particular period, obliterating other events and periods, and threatening 'erasure of the more nuanced, multi-faceted cultural narratives that characterize the region's vast history' (Tegelberg 2009: 499). The Khmer Rouge was not the only violent regime to rule Cambodia. As Eric Davis (2008: 132) succinctly notes: 'wars have plowed through Cambodia's last two hundred years....' Despite this, relatively little attention is paid to other eras.<sup>18</sup> This reification of the genocide as the only period of history worth considering not only

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<sup>17</sup> Some attention has been paid to other topics, but it is relatively rare in the anthropological sphere. Ang Chouléan focuses on spirits and the spirit world in Cambodia rather than the Khmer Rouge (1986, 1988, 1990, 2000). Ovensen and Trankell (2010) looked at doctor-patient relationships, and more recently at rice farming. As time goes on, other topics are emerging.

<sup>18</sup> This is partly an effect of the regime: on coming to power the national archive was appropriated by pig-keepers, and the documents and books it held neglected and many ruined – used for fires and as other resources. Following its deposition much of the remaining archive was mismanaged, so destroying much of the historical record (Clymer 1995). David Chandler's (2008) *A History of Cambodia*, however, provides a comprehensive introduction to earlier eras.

dominates contemporary imaginings of Cambodia, but also risks colonizing future definitions of the country.

This may be unavoidable; while it did not necessarily invade the minds of my informants constantly, the Khmer Rouge regime did rupture Cambodia, both socially and physically. It was a critical event after which the country needed not only rebuilding, but also re-imagining. It is within this context that I approach the regime and its consequences in the form of mass graves throughout this thesis, as explained below.

### **Theoretical framework**

‘Social memory is shaped and reshaped by the treatment of corpses’ Katherine Verdery wrote (1996: 233). The treatment of dead bodies make visible social relations, political hierarchies, religious systems, and wider cosmological understandings of what it means to be human in a particular place at a particular time. Because of this, Verdery asserts, their treatment make visible transformations in the worldview of particular places. Though her arguments relate specifically to the dead (their corpses and their spirits), in this thesis I extend this argument to include mass graves as the spaces that the dead inhabit or are imaginatively linked to: spaces where they once lay; spaces where they were killed; spaces where they are now displayed. It is often the case that spaces remain neutral until they become politically useful: it is at this time that people re-forge an interest and ownership of the space and its contents. If, as Verdery (2000) argues, bodies are inherently political, then the spaces containing them become political by proxy. This can be seen throughout this thesis, as particular

attention or dismissal of mass graves and their dead changed through time, for both the state and local communities, in relation to differing contexts and needs.

So why are dead bodies so political? Across the globe and far back in time dead bodies have been used in politics. Their use is based on two things: their physicality and their silence. Through both these characteristics they become powerful political symbols, open to manipulation and harnessing for particular ends. Corpses are material objects, and it is this materiality that is central to their efficacy; 'a dead body is meaningful not in itself but through culturally established relations to death and through the way a specific dead person's importance is (variously) construed' (Verdery 1999: 28). Their value as symbolic entities rests on 'their ambiguity, their multivocality or polysemy. Remains are concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings' (ibid). It is this ambiguity that enables their political lives, which is made visible through their changing status as objects of attention in various different times. We will see in this thesis how in Cambodia the treatment of the dead from the Khmer Rouge, and the graves in which they lay, has changed since the demise of the regime depending on the *realpolitik* of the time; that goes as much for ordinary, everyday interactions with the dead as state appropriations and care of the remains.

But it is not just their silence that invites their use; it is also their humanity. Verdery argues that two types of dead bodies become political symbols: corpses of the famous and anonymous remains. The dead of the mass graves in Cambodia belong to the second category and their power lies in their ability to stand for 'entire social categories' (ibid. 20) whilst also belonging to certain individuals and therefore particular networks of kin and belonging. Where famous corpses

remind people of their previous power and position, and therefore who and what they stood for, anonymous remains represent a group, usually wronged in one way or another. The mass dead and their graves provide powerful locators of social identities for a plurality of voices; some of which may agree, some which may be contested. When mass graves abound the bodies themselves need not be uncovered and the spaces themselves come to stand for these abuses. And although they are used for a number of things, they come in people's minds, to represent one: 'because they have a single name and a single body, they present an illusion of having *only one* significance' (Verdery 1999: 29, italics original). That significance changes depending on context and who is making use of the narration; it is often a significance that varies between the state and the everyday people, though sometimes these collide.

Verdery uses politics to describe actions between social actors, with a certain aim in mind, but this aim, she contends, should have a 'public' issue. Politics, she explains, is not only about state building and nationalism, but also about kinship, the dead and the living, and how these are maintained or altered to suit particular needs. This is similar to Jonathan Spencer's (2007) concept of 'the political,' which argues that there is an irreducibly political dimension to everyday life, particularly in the re-imagination of life and community after conflict. In such scenarios, politics and culture are viewed as two analytical perspectives 'on a single dynamic process' (ibid.: 17) and the unbounded nature of the political is performative and expressive as well as instrumental, and not only destructive but also productive (as an example Spencer explains how whilst violence is destructive, it opens the space for new or changed states of subjectivity and/or solidarity (ibid.)). Dead-body politics, Verdery writes, are about re-writing history and by doing that, re-ordering the meaningful universe (ibid.: 26). It is here where

Katherine Verdery's work collides with that of Veena Das theory of critical events, and provides the framework for this thesis.

The Khmer Rouge regime produced a cataclysmic rupture in Cambodian life. The world that people lived in before, though far from peaceful, had elements of routine that people knew and trusted. Democratic Kampuchea attempted to rip away the previous life and start a new one. The country was no longer that which anyone knew. Its name was changed to Democratic Kampuchea. The year was no longer 1975, but Year Zero, as if restarting the calendar could restart the nation. Families were torn apart. Law, religion and education were demolished and the normal social order was reversed: rural, uneducated people became top of the hierarchy; the wealthy and educated fell to the bottom. Children ruled over adults; the poor over the rich; the uneducated over the religious and political leaders. Though its short life span prevented its complete success, the fractures caused by the Khmer Rouge regime were devastating, and every element of the country needed rebuilding, as if from scratch, following its fall: political stability, moral order, social relationships.

Critical events, Das (1997) contends, create a space in which worlds are reshaped and reimagined. Acts of violence, and their subsequent imaginings, she argues, are often used to illustrate the tension between the state and the community or the individual, where the state represents the impersonal and dehumanising and the community the personal and human.<sup>19</sup> This may be the case, however, they are not necessarily opposed, and each is liable to shape the other, particularly

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<sup>19</sup> 'The theories of community in the literature of the social sciences and political philosophy' she writes 'are premised upon the idea that the community is the realm of face-to-face relations. It is therefore valorized as a resource for challenging the impersonal, dehumanizing structures of the modern state' (Das 1997: 17).



following events of national importance such as conflict or disaster. After such events new modes of action come into being that redefine traditional categories and ways of understanding the world. They create 'transformations in space by which people's lives have been propelled into new and unpredicted terrains' (ibid: 5). These events need not be of a cataclysmic scale (although the Khmer Rouge regime was for many, though not all), but through their disruption of expected norms, they give new agency to different groups and people, and new ways of conceptualizing previously existing ones. By doing so they alter understandings of the state and family – uniting them or dividing them in unexpected ways. They confuse or disrupt definitions of power and legitimacy and from this, new formations of community and culture emerge (ibid: 10 – 12).

The critical event of this thesis is the Khmer Rouge regime, and mass graves and the dead they contain are the lens through which I view the way it is used in contemporary Cambodia to reconstitute and re-imagine the world. So let us first look at what I mean by a mass grave in the case of Cambodia.

### **What is a mass grave?**

For this thesis, which deals with the dead as much as with their spaces of disposal, I consider Cambodian mass grave sites from Democratic Kampuchea to be sites in which multiple graves are contained all resulting from the policies and practices of the Khmer Rouge regime, both execution and death by attrition. Most of these are commingled grave pits, however, in some locations multiple single burial clusters are included. For ease of understanding, I use the term grave to denote any place where a corpse was disposed of during this time. The term killing site denotes an area where executions were conducted – during Democratic Kampuchea these were

always concomitant with gravesites and usually very close to security centres<sup>20</sup>.

Most contain multiple mass grave pits and large numbers of dead.

This varies from other descriptions in Cambodia (and across the world). Definitions of mass graves vary depending on the author's interest: practitioners (such as Haglund 2002; Mant 1987; and Skinner 1987)<sup>21</sup> tend to base their definition on the physical constitution of space - the numbers of bodies contained in one pit, or the proximity of bodies to one another for example. Theoretically minded academics (for example Schmidt 2002) focus on the socio-historic aspects of their creation such as the cause and manner of death of those within. The Wiley Encyclopedia of Forensic Science proposes that a mass grave should contain four or more bodies buried at the same time, because that 'is consistent with the definition of mass murder' (Connor 2012)<sup>22</sup>. The common thread of these definitions is one burial pit containing multiple corpses, or partial human remains from multiple individuals. The graves from Democratic Kampuchea, however, present multiple scenarios: killing sites with pits containing several bodies; locations where hundreds, if not thousands, of people were buried unceremoniously, but in individual pits; others where no burials occurred, but bodies were left to rot or piled in a heap, or thrown

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<sup>20</sup> The Khmer Rouge ran a system of approximately 200 security centres distributed across the zones of Democratic Kampuchea, the most famous of which is S-21: the suite that included Tuol Sleng prison and its killing site Choeung Ek.

<sup>21</sup> Skinner (1987) contends that a mass grave should contain six or more individuals; Mant (1987) suggests two bodies are enough provided they touch each other, whilst (Haglund 2002) chooses four. Meanwhile, the United Nations, whose guidelines many organisations working with mass graves follow, do not use the term 'mass grave', but instead differentiate between 'individual' and 'commingled' burial, with commingled burials being constituted of three or more individuals buried together.

<sup>22</sup> This last definition points to one of the characteristics of the term 'mass grave' in most circumstances: it implies an extrajudicial aspect to its creation. Whilst many mass graves may be of forensic (i.e. medico-legal) interest, this does not necessarily mean criminal: mass graves have been used throughout history for official burials as well as those created clandestinely. This continues to date. Following the Asian Tsunami of 2004, many bodies were tagged and buried in mass graves to prevent thousands of rotting corpses lying on the surface whilst identification efforts continued. Likewise following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti a decision was made to bury the victims in mass graves because the priority was to deal with the living and rebuild the countryside (Klauser 2012).

in a ditch or a hole or a well. Although the Cambodian Genocide Program of Yale University (which undertook an extensive mapping project of mass graves across Cambodia) defined a mass grave as any including more than one body (Etcheson 2014), I believe the situation needs a more inclusive definition, to fully convey the extent and devastation of the graves in Cambodia.

Much of the research previously conducted on the dead of the Khmer Rouge concerns itself with the issue of ‘violent deaths:’ deaths caused by execution or as the result of torture, rather than deaths occurring from disease or starvation. The underlying premise of this is that these are the deaths that prove the extent of the Khmer Rouge’s horror. Certainly the thought of a regime executing around a million of its own population is horrifying, but so is the idea that they would cause the starvation and death from disease of as many, if not more people.<sup>23</sup> The loss of these people was as much a part of the overall devastation of Cambodia as those executed, and I consider these deaths to be evidence of violence as well as those who were deliberately executed. This differs to previous research conducted on the subject. As Craig Etcheson, who began the mapping project of the mass graves conducted by the Cambodian Genocide Program and DC-Cam, informed me (2014, my highlights):

the purpose of the mass grave mapping project was to identify victims of *violence*. Thus, if we identified a mass grave that was adjacent to a known Khmer Rouge hospital or medical facility, that would not be included in the mass grave list, as it was assumed that it contained victims of the DK’s [sic] hopelessly

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<sup>23</sup> Scholars agree that the majority of those who perished during the Khmer Rouge died from disease or starvation: demographer Marek Sliwinski estimated 60% of those who died did so from causes other than execution with 49% from disease or starvation (Sliwinski 1995: 82), whilst Milton Osbourne suggested executions count for only 31% of those who died (Etcheson 2000).

incompetent health care system, *rather than victims of state-sponsored violence* per se.

Whilst there may be a forensic purpose in differentiating the manner of death, this separation of death caused by starvation or disease from 'violent' deaths is misleading in an overall contextualisation of the brutality of the regime and I consider those who died from disease and starvation as relevant to my research as those who were executed or died from torture. Violence does not exclusively denote physical attacks; there is violence in the starvation and disease that occurred as a direct result of the policies of the Khmer Rouge - policies that expelled or executed the medical corps; policies that forcibly moved people from their homes and drove them marching for thousands of miles; policies that reduced the daily amount of food per person to one cup of watery rice soup<sup>24</sup>; policies that, in short, caused massive death. Helen Fein (1997: 10) argues that deaths from disease and starvation are 'genocide by attrition' which:

occurs when a group is stripped of its human rights, political, civil and economic. This leads to deprivation of conditions essential for maintaining health, thereby producing mass death.

In that case, those who died of starvation or disease were as much victims of state-sponsored violence<sup>25</sup> as those tortured or executed.

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<sup>24</sup> One informant described death from starvation very vividly to me: 'during Pol Pot people became weaker and weaker. It was like an oil lamp that was running out of oil and the light became less and less bright. Then it was gone.'

<sup>25</sup> Throughout this thesis I use Johan Galtung's classifications of violence (1969; 1990): structural, cultural and direct, where structural is a violence by which some structure prevents certain peoples from meeting their basic needs; cultural violence is where demeanours learned in childhood and throughout our upbringing reinforce the supposed need for violence; and direct violence is a (physical / verbal / psychological) infliction of violence on a person or persons. In Galtung's theories, structural and cultural violence lead to direct violence, and direct violence

## Thesis outline

This final section outlines the organisation of the thesis. The overall text is split into three sections. The first (the introduction and chapter one) provides the context for the study and the research in which I engaged. Sections two and three provide the ethnographic encounters with my subject, divided into two main conceptual distinctions: 'the dead' and 'the graves.' Section two (chapters two to four) engages with the dead: exploring the everyday interactions with those who died during the regime via Buddhism and animism. The third section (chapters five to seven) analyses national and international relationships to the dead and the graves, which are used to present political salient narratives of the regime that direct action to particular ends. The final chapter, *Now is the Time for the Living*, brings all the different elements together, drawing the thesis to its conclusion.

### Section one: setting the scene

This introduction has provided a context to the research as well as its aims and motivations. It situates the thesis theoretically and provides a framework from which to approach the ethnographic material encountered.

But these encounters are not self-contained, and their intricacies lie in the complexities of the past from which they have emerged. Through the introduction of my main fieldsites (Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, close to Phnom Penh, and an island I call Koh Sop in the Bassac River), chapter one offers some

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reinforces the others. These theories suggest that violence can be embedded within the local, national, regional and even global social structures that societies and their populations inhabit, meaning that systematic violence can be both the behavioural response to conflict and its cause. I consider political, economic, bureaucratic and institutional violence to be forms of structural violence, which may result in actions of direct violence.

historical context to the mass graves, introducing how they were made (metaphorically and physically); who they house(d); their unearthing in the 1980s; and subsequent treatment. By introducing the graves at these sites it situates the ethnographic and discursive aspects of the thesis. This chapter also discusses the methods used, and considers the ethics involved in tackling the complex subject of mass graves in contemporary Cambodia.

## **Section two: digging up the dead**

Chapter two outlines the specificities of Buddhism and animism in Cambodia, examining how these were affected (or not) by the Khmer Rouge regime, and the importance of particular aspects of their practice to relationships to the dead, particularly funerary rituals and annual ceremonies such as New Year, *Cheng Meng*, and *Pchum Benh*. This chapter provides the foundation for chapters four and five, exploring what it is about Khmer Buddhism and animism that enables people to draw on them today to understand and narrate the Khmer Rouge period and reintegrate the dead within contemporary society.

Though relations to the dead are managed in specific religious and social contexts, chapter three explores how these relationships can transform over time depending on the social and political status of the living and the country. Ghosts and spirits are not imaginary beings in Cambodia, but social beings that inhabit the world alongside the living, interacting in ways that shape relationships to the past. Following Heonik Kwon's (2008) thesis that ghosts can be central to understanding experiences of the living, particularly the way social lives of the dead mirror political lives of the living, this chapter explores the changing status of the dead from Democratic Kampuchea, illustrating their transition from

frightened and frightening entities of haunting, to benevolent allies in the reconstruction of post-DK Cambodia, to powerless beings who have since died or left the area where they were killed. By comparing relationships at Choeung Ek and Koh Sop it will show that their support and interactions are locally situated; in Koh Sop the interactions are local and individual; at Choeung Ek they are national and collective.

Moving on from relations with the dead, chapter four explores how the mass death caused by the Khmer Rouge regime is narrated using the Buddhist concepts of reincarnation and karma. For many of my informants, this life is simply one of a cycle of lives leading (eventually) to *nirvana* (Pali: *nibbana*). Using Lambek's (2013) concept of the continuous and discontinuous person that connects historical periods as well as persons, I argue that the Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation are means by which many Khmer people come to understand and narrate the 'tragedy of Cambodian history' (Chandler 1993), and in so doing, to normalise and integrate mass death into an expected aspect of life and cosmology. Deaths from the Khmer Rouge period are often explained, through karma, as resultant of misdeeds in a previous life, and the majority of those who died are already considered to have been reborn. In this way, the violence of the regime is incorporated into today's life, and rather than being reminders of terrible violence, the graves it resulted in can be integrated into everyday living space. The exploration of karma and reincarnation in this way allows for an exploration beyond memory, to the social incorporation of the dead into contemporary Cambodia.

### **Section three: grave concerns**

Section three moves away from everyday encounters with the dead to examine extra-ordinary relationships with them; specifically through the theatre of politics in contemporary Cambodia and the international encounters with them and their graves encouraged by tourism.

Chapter five introduces the political sphere, describing how the ruling party (the Cambodian People's Party) came to power, and their very particular relationship to the Khmer Rouge regime. This chapter lays the foundations for chapters six and seven, exploring what it is about the graves and their dead that enable them to be used politically and how this affects the creation and maintenance of collective narratives of the regime and its demise. It does this by examining how the graves have been memorialised since 1979, and the various machinations that have influenced which sites receive attention and which are rendered invisible. By doing this, it will show how the graves and their dead have been used in the creation of the new, post-Khmer Rouge, Cambodian state, and how this has changed in the years since liberation.

An integral part of Cambodia's national strategy is the encouragement of tourism as a mode of development. Chapter six uses Schwenkel's (2006) concept of recombinant history (where the meaning of historical sites are negotiated and reconstituted in global spheres of imagination for economic prosperity) to show how the materiality of death at Choeung Ek (preserved mass grave pits and the display of human remains) is exploited to appeal to the tourist appetite for sites of violence, in order to improve economic prosperity and social development, as well as to future peace and stability by connecting it to a wider global network. By



coming to the site, tourists are considered to engage in reciprocal relationships with Cambodia, supporting it whilst benefitting from it. Consequently whilst the transformations inherent in such commodifications alter and adjust collective narrations of the past, they do this in anticipation of the future.

Chapter seven brings us back to critical events by examining the 2013 general elections. Using Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology (where specters of particular pasts inhabit the present and shape the future) this chapter argues that although contemporary politics is formed in opposition to the Khmer Rouge regime, with the main parties claiming to exorcise it from Cambodia, it re-enacts the sphere of political violence and distrust by which they ruled. The main political parties revitalise the terror of the Khmer Rouge in their campaigning and maintain its symbolic power by doing so. The active husbandry of these spirits, made viable through direct and structural violence in Cambodia (and at election times through the use of particular mass grave memorials), not only reminds people of the regime but also revives its existence as a viable threat, and in so doing, consolidates the political power and hegemony of the ruling party.

The concluding chapter, *Now is the Time for the Living*, brings together the different narratives of each chapter. It returns to my initial thesis: that the Khmer Rouge regime was a critical event in Cambodia's past that has led to a re-imagining and redefinition of traditional categories and understandings of social life, which mass graves articulate and make visible on individual, local and state levels. It will argue, however, that while state and individual articulations may appear to be in opposition to each other, they are intrinsically linked, and encounters with these spaces thus make visible the overlapping plurality of connections with mass graves.

## **Chapter one: Fields of death, sites of life - fieldsites and methods**

Though this fieldwork was conducted across many sites, two primary locations formed the basis of the work. This chapter introduces these fieldsites, putting them into historical context of the Khmer Rouge period and the eras surrounding it. In doing so it introduces the mass graves of Cambodia - their creation, the bodies within them and, briefly, some of their treatments after the demise of the regime. Research methods that were particular to each site are also discussed, as well as overall methodological considerations.

### **Choeung Ek**

17 kilometres from the urban sprawl of Cambodia's capital city Phnom Penh, down dusty, pot-holed roads, past newly built garment factories and empty fields bounded by fences, and next to the stinking municipal dump, lies Choeung Ek Genocidal Center. Unlike its name, the site is peaceful. The sound of children from the nearby school flows through the trees and flowers that puncture the landscape. Dogs and chickens roam around the site, searching for food and attention. And every day, hundreds of people come through the gates to encounter its horrors. I came to Choeung Ek because of its past – a killing site of more than 14,000 people, but also because of its present – a highly visited tourist destination and national memorial. Choeung Ek is home to the most internationally famous 'killing field' of Cambodia and until March 2015, when Tuol Sleng prison inaugurated its memorial, the only official national memorial to the

Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia. During the Democratic Kampuchea period, the site was both a killing and burial site, mostly of prisoners from Tuol Sleng prison in central Phnom Penh: a prison used primarily as a torture and retention centre for Khmer Rouge cadre and their families (Chandler 1999: 139).

But let us first return to its past. Before Democratic Kampuchea, Choeung Ek was a peaceful place. Sitting at the junction of three villages, the site was bordered by rice fields and an orchard of longan trees belonging to a local landowner, whose relatives still live in the area. A small lake to the east flooded in the rainy season, merging with the larger lakes behind it to form a massive area of wetland, filling the paddies, and bringing fish and water plants such as morning glory (*trawkoon*), which local people harvested to eat and sell.

The setting was tranquil, and a feng shui expert assessed the site and pronounced it an ideal location for the dead: if buried there they would be happy and help their families: 'it was said to be a good place where the children would do well [in their future businesses]' Yay Chan, an elderly woman whose family has lived in the village behind Choeung Ek for generations, told me.<sup>26</sup> The site was perfect: tranquil countryside, with enough space for concrete graves that could be elaborately decorated during the annual Chinese grave-sweeping festival of Cheng Meng. One of the villages had a number of Chinese-Khmer families and, even before Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953, the site was used as a Chinese cemetery. When the Khmer Rouge took over, rows of Chinese-Khmer were buried there.

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<sup>26</sup> Even before the Chinese came the dead inhabited the area: the site has been used as a burial site since the Iron Age (Latinis 2011).

The remnants of many Chinese graves can still be seen at the site, jutting through the edges of the mass grave pits, though few people notice them as they walk around the site, immersed in the audio tour that guides their sight and senses, or directed by tour guides who point out only one or two graves that cannot be obscured on the path around the site. The site, and literature written on Choeung Ek claims it 'used to be a Chinese graveyard.' In reality it still is: whilst most families moved their dead in the 1980s<sup>27</sup>, a few local families left their relatives where they lay. They continue to practice the annual *Cheng Meng* festival (see chapter two) and are loath to move their graves; their relatives are happy here; the graves are safe and people visit them. Bong Chann (whose father is buried at Choeung Ek) explained that the dead show their appreciation by helping keep their relatives in work and free from serious illness:

He is with his group of people. I feel lucky that we buried him down there.... It's a tourist site - it's a happy place for him; there are a lot of visitors. It's not too quiet for him. He's been here for a long time. He's been happy and has helped us be happy and rich.

The site was quiet, and life in the villages around it was steady. As was usual for Khmer villages, many of the inhabitants were related (Ebihara 1968) and marriages between the villages were relatively common. Whilst a few people travelled to work in nearby Phnom Penh, mostly as construction workers, most never travelled far from home. Days were spent working; free time visiting other's homes. 'Mostly we were farmers and fishermen' Ta Ta, an elderly man

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<sup>27</sup> Stories varied as to why they were moved. A few people told me the relatives had moved them in the initial years after liberation because the site was chaotic and they did not want them to be involved with the mass dead, however, the Chinese-Khmer families I interviewed who still have their relatives graves there considered themselves lucky that the graves of their relatives were on the outskirts of the site because they had not been told to move them as others had.

from the village, told me. During the civil conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s the site and its surroundings remained relatively peaceful. Wetland and Chinese graveyards had little interest to any of the fighting parties at the time.

### **Making the killing field**

Even in the first few months of Democratic Kampuchea, Choeung Ek and the villages around it remained quiet. Although put to work for *Ângkar* ('the organisation' as the Khmer Rouge called themselves), at first people remained in their homes with their families because, being a rural site, it was already contributing to *Ângkar's* agrarian ideal. In 1976, however, everything changed.

From the beginning of the Khmer Rouge revolution in April 1975, high profile prisoners of the regime were imprisoned in a villa in Phnom Penh belonging to an uncle of Prince Sihanouk<sup>28</sup>. Other 'enemies of the party' were detained and killed at Takhmao mental health hospital in Kandal province, which was turned into a prison under the leadership of In Lon (nomme de guerre, Comrade Nath). In October 1975, under the orders of Son Sen, Kaing Guek Eav (Comrade Duch), moved from Takhmao prison to become commandant at Tuol Sleng Prison (part of

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<sup>28</sup> Norodom Sihanouk was a controversial political figure. King from 1941 to 1955, and again from 1993 – 2004, he led Cambodia's independence from France in 1953. In 1955 he abdicated and was elected Prime Minister; when the King died in 1960 he passed a law declaring himself Head of State. In 1970 he was overthrown in a coup led by General Lon Nol. Between 1970 and 1991, and after his second abdication in 2004, Sihanouk mostly lived in exile in China and North Korea, apart from a brief re-entry to Cambodia during Democratic Kampuchea. In 1975 Sihanouk was declared Head of State for Democratic Kampuchea; he resigned in 1976 and was put under house arrest. Five of his children were executed during the regime, and after being deported in 1979 Sihanouk denounced the Khmer Rouge at the UN Security Council. However, in 1982, in opposition to the Vietnamese-backed PRK, he entered a coalition with them, forming the Cambodian Government Democratic Party (the CGDP). The CGDP retained Cambodia's seat in the UN until 1993. Following elections in 1993 Sihanouk was once again declared Head of State, and was King until he abdicated in 2004. He died in China in 2012 and his body was returned to Cambodia shortly afterwards.

the S-21 security facility<sup>29</sup>) in central Phnom Penh. From then on, all new prisoners of the area became the responsibility of Duch at Tuol Sleng.<sup>30</sup> Nath remained at Takhmao. Duch took over full command of S-21 in March 1976 and in June 1976 all the prisoners at Takhmao were executed, and buried in the lands around the hospital<sup>31</sup>.

Tuol Sleng was to become Democratic Kampuchea's most notorious prison, though by no means its largest. Its distinction lay in the type of prisoners held there – initially high profile prisoners and those deemed particularly dangerous to the revolution (monks, doctors, intellectuals), then as paranoia started to spread through the regime it became the main prison used for Khmer Rouge cadre and their families. Few people survived Tuol Sleng; once a person arrived they were already condemned. 'If someone came to prison, they had to be killed,' Duch told me when I interviewed him in Kandal provincial prison, where he is serving a life sentence for his role as commandant of the prison. 'It was the political pathway of the Khmer Rouge; we had to destroy the enemy.' David Chandler (1999: 6), a historian who has written extensively on the prison, explained:

Tortured or threatened with torture, few prisoners maintained their innocence for long. Considered guilty from the moment they arrived—the traditional Cambodian phrase for prisoner, *neak thos*, translates literally as “guilty person”—

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<sup>29</sup> S-21 included Prey Sar and Tuol Sleng prisons in Phnom Penh, Choeung Ek killing site 17km away, and Takhmao prison and killing site, in Kandal province.

<sup>30</sup> Duch was already an experienced commandant: between 1970 and 1973 he ran M-13, a security office in Kampong Speu province, where he perfected his torture and interrogation techniques. French ethnologist Francois Bizot was captured and held there, along with his Khmer research assistants who were later killed. His book *The Gate* (2004) is a compelling account of that experience and the initial stages of the Khmer Rouge regime.

<sup>31</sup> When the hospital was returned to its former function in 1977, Duch returned and unearthed, then burnt, all the bodies. 'As a hospital, it should be a hospital' he told me. 'It didn't need those bodies.'

thousands of these men and women were expected to confess their guilt in writing before they were taken off to be killed.

Many were killed at Tuol Sleng itself, particularly in the early days, however, as purges of Khmer Rouge cadre increased, it quickly filled, and by the end of 1976 a separate killing location became necessary. 'I don't know when we started killing at Choeung Ek, but it was early' Duch said. '[Comrade] Ho<sup>32</sup> took the prisoners there. He knew the site from before; I think it was a killing site of his.'

In preparation for the transformation of Choeung Ek, life in the villages surrounding it changed. In late 1975 or sometime in 1976 (the few people remaining in the villages who recall the period could not remember exactly when) people were evacuated from the villages, joining the millions of people already displaced by the regime. In one village a dormitory was built for Chinese economic experts who came to Cambodia to advise the regime (Chandler 1999), close by were sleeping quarters and kitchens for the guards who worked at the site. To produce a killing site, zinc walls were erected around the site and electricity provided 'to illuminate the executions and to allow the guards from the prison to read and sign the rosters that accompanied prisoners' (ibid.: 139).

The role of Choeung Ek was a heavily guarded secret. People from the local co-operative knew that it was a Khmer Rouge facility, but only those related to the regime knew what went on inside. 'At night we saw trucks driving down the roads to the site' a farmer from a nearby village told me. 'We thought it was an army training ground.'

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<sup>32</sup> Although Duch was commandant of S-21, and therefore in overall command of both Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, Khim Vat, alias Ho, was his deputy, and an equally fearsome disciplinarian (Chandler 1999: 23). 'Ho was responsible for the killing' Duch told me. 'I was in charge of interrogations.'

Every two to three weeks, trucks of prisoners from Tuol Sleng arrived at the site, driven by a special corps of cadre, many of whom also worked as torturers and executioners. Unloaded at the entrance, the prisoners stood, awaiting their deaths. They did not wait long. During the day, guards based at the site dug graves in anticipation of the next shipment; once dark had fallen, and the trucks arrived, the killings began. To conserve ammunition, the methods were brutal: serrated palm leaves drawn across throats; shovels smashed over people's heads, collapsing them into the graves; children held by their feet, their skulls swung against trees. Him Huy, one of the truck drivers, and a regular executioner at the site, has described the killings in various interviews since the regime:

They were ordered to kneel down at the edge of the hole. Their hands were tied behind them. They were beaten on the neck with an iron ox-cart axle, sometimes with one blow, sometimes with two. . . . Ho inspected the killings, and I recorded the names. We took the names back to Suos Thi [Head of the documentation section at Tuol Sleng]. There could not be any missing names (Him Huy quoted in Chandler 1999: 140).

Music blared out of speakers hung from a tree, disguising the sounds of killing.<sup>33</sup> Once a pit was filled with bodies the guards covered it in soil and moved on to the next. The number killed each trip varied from a few dozen to over three hundred (ibid.). Escape was impossible.

No-one knows exactly how many were killed at the site. Scholars' best estimates range between 14 and 17,000 people, although researchers for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (the ECCC – otherwise known as the Khmer

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<sup>33</sup> After the fall of the regime the loudspeakers were appropriated by a local family to provide music for parties and future celebrations.



Rouge Trials) could only find proof beyond reasonable doubt for 12,273 people<sup>34</sup>. Most were from Tuol Sleng, but a local villager, who provided food for the Khmer Rouge cadre, told me that people working in the commune closest to the site were also brought here to be killed. His brother, sister, a cousin and their children were all executed at the site: 'if they wanted to "educate" people, they took them to Phnom Taleong, and if they didn't change, they would come here [to be killed]' he told me.

Unceremonious burial followed the executions. Some bodies were stripped before being interred but most were left as they were. Many graves were filled haphazardly, others were highly organised; some stacked neatly on top of each other to make the most efficient use of the space, others divided by type of person: one grave contained only corpses dressed in the uniforms of the Lon Nol military, all without heads; another had only the bodies of women and children.

The choice of Choeung Ek as a killing site is still unexplained. At other locations executions were usually within a few hundred metres of the prison itself. When I interviewed him, Duch claimed that Ho selected it. Om Ta, one of the caretakers at the site, took its choice as evidence of the millenarian ambitions of the Khmer Rouge, and their disregard for the old Cambodia:

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<sup>34</sup> Although meticulous records were kept at Tuol Sleng, French historian Henri Locard told me that in the period immediately after Democratic Kampuchea, some records were tampered with or removed by officials of the new regime (Locard 2013). Verifiable evidence of the detention, torture, and killing of 12,273 people is known, however, there were almost certainly more, both from Tuol Sleng and the areas surrounding Choeung Ek.

the Pol Pots<sup>35</sup>, they never valued what we already had. They never cared... they destroyed culture.... they wanted to destroy everything already existing completely. That's how it was. They never cared about ancestors' spirits at all.

Ta Ta thought the secret lies in its history; 'there were already many bodies here. Maybe they could confuse them with the Chinese.' Certainly it is not uncommon for mass graves to be located in established cemeteries; where better to hide bodies than amongst the dead?<sup>36</sup>

### **After Democratic Kampuchea**

Choeung Ek's employment as a killing site, though devastating, was brief. On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1979, heavily armoured Vietnamese troops succeeded in removing the Khmer Rouge from power. Tired of the on going war between themselves and the Khmer Rouge, they had invaded Cambodia 14 days earlier. The Khmer Rouge fled their bases, leaving chaos and death behind them – in many areas they slaughtered prisoners before they left, but the rapidity of the advance gave little time for care and attention, and many of these bodies were simply abandoned where they were killed, leaving a path of death and destruction to greet the Vietnamese.

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<sup>35</sup> The Pol Pots is the name by which many Khmer people refer to the Khmer Rouge. The subsumation of the regime into one identifiable figure (Pol Pot) is discussed in chapter five.

<sup>36</sup> I often wondered, both during my fieldwork and afterwards, how much the location also related to the fact that those killed there were primarily Khmer Rouge, several of them cadre previously known to the torturers at Tuol Sleng and the executioners at Choeung Ek (Ke Khim Khouart (Duch's junior high school teacher and Khmer Rouge cadre) and Vorn Vet (Deputy Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea until 1978) for example). Perhaps, I thought, burying them in an established graveyard was a subconscious mode of reducing the burden of both their deaths and disposal. Choeung Ek is one of the only killing sites across Cambodia that was hidden, where security was so tight, and where it was mostly Khmer Rouge who dug the graves: in most others existing features of the landscape were used, bodies were abandoned where they were killed. When graves were dug, it was usually by the prisoners themselves, or villagers in the work camps. The cadre rarely undertook this grim task.

Whilst some villagers, fearing the Vietnamese would kill them, fled with the Khmer Rouge<sup>37</sup>, others took advantage of the invasion, and despite heavy aerial bombardment, started the long journeys home.<sup>38</sup> People began returning to the villages around Choeung Ek almost immediately. Ta Ta was one of the first to arrive - during the regime he had been evacuated only a few kilometres away, so his journey back was swift. He soon discovered that his house had been demolished and the materials used to build facilities for the Khmer Rouge cadre stationed at Choeung Ek: four or five long wooden halls, roofed with zinc – a kitchen, sleeping quarters and storage rooms he thought. Rabbits, bred for food, were kept in rows of cages beyond the halls.<sup>39</sup>

The halls in the villages, and shelters within the site itself were initially used as shelter for those returning and others on their long walks home, but over the next few months, Ta Ta explained, people took the materials to rebuild the lives of those returning:

Those whose houses had been destroyed shared the materials in order to rebuild their own houses to live.... My house was here. Then they [the Khmer Rouge] came, and I moved to the South. When I returned, my house was destroyed. So we shared the halls and lived on.

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<sup>37</sup> 'They told us the Vietnamese would kill us, so we kept running. At that time, we were not sure which were good or bad [of the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge], so we kept following them [the Khmer Rouge]' one informant told me.

<sup>38</sup> An elderly couple I interviewed in Kandal province vividly described this to me: 'We ran back here in a shower of bombs dropped by the Vietnamese. It was as if rice seeds were being spread.... But we were glad to be able to come back to our village again.... We walked all the way. We walked so far that our legs and hands became numb.'

<sup>39</sup> Victims of the rapid abandonment, the rabbits too had succumbed to starvation. 'They were dead in the cages. So many; so many rabbits. All white. So many cages,' Ta Ta told me.

The grisly purpose of Choeung Ek however, remained concealed; the graves were covered, and people paid little attention to anything beyond survival. Ghosts haunted those who stayed there, and Ta Ta said at night they would hear children crying, or chains being dragged. Though they supposed it must mean the dead were nearby, this was to be expected following Democratic Kampuchea. It was only when the first graves were unearthed and the smell of death and decomposition spread to the villages that local people realised what the site was:

after [my return to the village], quite a while later, about two months, the place was dug. It was possibly December - it was cold and windy, and the smell was terrible. I'm not sure if it was November or December, but I know it was the month when the wind was blowing from the North; that was when we knew that people had been killed there. Not until the graves were dug. The smell was so terrible that we could hardly eat our meals.

After invasion, Democratic Kampuchea was quickly replaced with the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and a cohort of Khmer defectors to Vietnam was put into government. In their efforts towards stabilisation and the assertion of their power, the Vietnamese backed government quickly began to exploit evidence that could be used to legitimate both their invasion into Cambodia and their continued rule, viewed by some as invasive occupation, throughout the 1980s.<sup>40</sup> Across the country there was no shortage of physical evidence; Democratic Kampuchea had not hidden the damage it had wrought - the

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<sup>40</sup> Mass graves are often used in this way today. In 2004, for example, Tony Blair declared that over 400,000 bodies had been found in mass graves across Iraq (USAID 2004), using this as evidence for the necessity of the coalition's invasion into Iraq in 2003. He later had to retract this statement, which was a complete fabrication (Beaumont 2004); even by the time I worked in Iraq in 2009 only a few thousand bodies had been found in a handful of graves.

population was emaciated, starving, and rife with disease; the dead littered the landscape.

Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek became important tools in this legitimization. Within days of being located, Tuol Sleng prison was turned into a museum for foreign journalists and visiting dignitaries under the direction of Mai Lam, a colonel of the Vietnamese army who designed the Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City (Chandler 1999, 2008; Tyner, Brinidis Alvarez and Colucci 2012).

Choeung Ek, its sister site, provided a compelling form of evidence with the thousands of dead it contained. But the dead were buried, and needed unearthing. The government sent a team to excavate, under the direction of Mai Lam.

However, before the government workers came, another group arrived; 'those related to the regime' according to two former directors of the site, both of whom were present at the time. This initial group arrived with a hand-drawn plan of Choeung Ek, and proceeded to unearth items that had been hastily hidden in some of the graves prior to the retreat of the cadre: 'they knew exactly [what they were looking for]. When they first came they said they wanted to dig the children's grave where they had buried hammocks, raincoats and other things' one former director told me. 'They must have had bloodstains on their hands.'

Smelling the death, and seeing this group dig and recover valuable items led people from the local villagers to search the site for more. Following this initial excavation, in which equipment, but not bodies, was unearthed, government and local people alike dug the graves: the government to extract bodies related to the

regime, and local villagers looking for gold and jewels. Bu Soth, who has worked at the site since the early 1980s, told me about joining in the looting:

When it was first unearthed villagers passed by the site and found gold. It spread from one person to another, and I heard about it, so I gathered another sixteen people and decided to dig one of the mass graves to see if we could find any gold. We dug that one that had 166 bodies, all headless. That's how I joined the digging...

His group had not uncovered any valuables, so they had given up. But other villagers continued searching, some finding gold and jewels, others watches and clothing. Before all the graves had been excavated, however, the government banned people from digging anymore and put guards on the site. Most of the people around Choeung Ek were not sure exactly of the reason, although Bu Soth believed it was due to the cholera that was spreading.<sup>41</sup> It was more likely, however to be due to a 1982 directive ordering local government officials to prevent people disturbing any more of the physical evidence remaining from the regime in an attempt to try and stop the deletion of the regime's material presence by dismantling the buildings and other evidence (see chapter five).

After being dug up, the bodies sat on the gravesides for months (or possibly years - no-one can really remember the exact timescale) before a wooden *p'teah khmouch*, (a small hut that literally translates as house for the dead, or ghost house) was built for them. Though conceived in the early years, the memorial

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<sup>41</sup> Although the dead do not usually pose a (physical) health risk, it is possible that if not cholera, some other disease was spreading around the area. Choeung Ek is a wetland area that floods every year. Rotting corpses could well have spread disease and bacteria into the water that fed the ricefields and rivers in the surrounding villages.

stupa<sup>42</sup> that contains the skeletal remains of those unearthed and dominates the site today (see figure three) was not completed until 1988; nine years after the bodies began to be excavated.<sup>43</sup> Its official inauguration on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1988 (the newly designated annual ‘Day of Anger’ – see chapter five) coincided with Choeung Ek’s official opening as a museum (*The National Centre for the Preservation of the Atrocities Committed by the Khmer Rouge*) however, from 1980 onwards, government officials had brought international journalists and other foreign dignitaries to the site several times a year.



Figure three: Choeung Ek stupa and displayed remains (source: the author)

<sup>42</sup> A stupa (from the Sanskrit *stūpa*, meaning heap) is a Buddhist structure for the remains of the dead. Most are built within pagoda grounds but some families build them at home. Ideally each stupa holds the remains of one person but some pagodas have communal stupa to inter the remains of people whose families cannot afford their own, or who have no known relatives.

<sup>43</sup> Choeung Ek was not the only place with a time delay between bodies being excavated and then rehouse. In Po Tonle in Kandal province, several families lived for several years in one of the prison buildings constructed under the Khmer Rouge. During that time the graves were excavated, and the bodies piled on to the roof of this hut, where they remained for several months before a local man built a *p'teah khmouch*. At night all that separated the dead from the living was a thin wooden roof. ‘The dead were nice though,’ one of the villagers commented: ‘they never haunted us.’

As the political situation in Cambodia stabilised and visitor numbers increased, Choeung Ek grew in popularity as a tourist site. Easily accessible from Phnom Penh, with dramatic physical evidence in the form of skeletal remains and numerous visible grave pits, the site is compelling. By the late 1990s it saw a regular influx of foreign visitors, and in 2005 the site was privatized, and a 30-year lease given to a private company, JC Royal & Co, with an aim to increase tourist revenue from the site.<sup>44</sup>

### **Choeung Ek today**

Today Choeung Ek is primarily a tourist site, though its multi-functionality (as national memorial and educational tool) is highlighted by those, such as its directors, wishing to refute criticism following its privatisation. As more and more tourists visit, Choeung Ek and the area around it are changing. In 2012 the site was granted A1 status as a tourist site and was a 2014 Traveller's Choice award winner from Tripadvisor; the developments surrounding it reflect the centrality of this role in its constitution. Once a wild and ragged site ('it was stark and open. I remember the wind coming through the trees. And sometimes I wonder, should we be doing this; this making it into a park?' a former manager at the site commented), the concrete and brick developments are encroaching, with new ones appearing almost weekly. The road that leads up to the site is now covered in restaurants. Brick and concrete paths cover much of the land inside the gates. Shops flank the carpark; concrete walls border the graves.

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<sup>44</sup> See chapter six.



But as well as a tourist site, it is also a workplace and home. During my fieldwork 45 people worked at Choeung Ek: cleaners, guides, caretakers, management, shopkeepers. Whilst the management works only five days a week, most of the employees work six or seven days and Choeung Ek has become an extension of their home. Srey Srey cooks her lunch and dinner there, and her children come to do their homework at the site. Vanna lives with his wife and daughter on the site, as do two other caretakers and their families. Srey Pich works part-time on the audio guides but visits on her days off. Her brother, sister and father all work at the site too. Visitors to Choeung Ek are introduced to it as a place of death; destruction; deletion, and this is the overwhelming impression most leave with. But I experienced a site of vibrancy and life: children run around the grounds laughing and playing; dogs and chickens roam the grounds; trees and flowers abound; small patches of vegetables are grown by the families living on site; the lake that borders it is used for bathing, swimming, and water for cooking. A *Neak Ta* (guardian spirit) inhabits a tree next to the lake and villagers come to give him offerings, asking for protection and luck for themselves and their farms. He usually obliges.

### **Researching at Choeung Ek**

Gaining access to research at Choeung Ek took some time. I attempted to locate JC Royal and Co (the company that leases the site), but could find no contact details. I spoke to staff but no-one seemed to know who they worked for. When I asked, they simply said '*Ângkar*': 'the organisation'<sup>45</sup>. I asked who had employed

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<sup>45</sup> This confused me at first: during Democratic Kampuchea many ordinary people had not known of the Khmer Rouge; for the first two years of rule, the Communist Party of Cambodia (CPK) had kept their identity secret, simply referring to themselves as '*Ângkar*.' Even after Pol Pot announced its existence and his leadership in 1977, the news did not filter down to many people,

them and was directed to Om Ty, the director. Om Ty told me to ask City Hall: 'they may or may not give you permission' he said.

It was a serendipitous encounter that finally brought me access. At an Impunity Watch run conference on memorialisation in September 2012 I met Mina Bui Jones, the country director of the Australian based Narrowcasters - the company that made the audio tours for Choeung Ek. After requesting her help in identifying who to talk to, she took me to the site and arranged a meeting with one of the directors. Considering my application, and Mina's support, I was granted access to conduct the research I wished, provided I not disturb the staff too much. There is no doubt in my mind that without Mina's help getting permission would have been more difficult and the access I was given more limited.

Whilst working at the site I lived in Phnom Penh, travelling to and fro with my research assistant by tuktuk or moto. The site opens from 08:00 to 17:00; visiting in this way mirrored the movements of the staff. Most of the research at Choeung Ek was conducted on site, but I also visited the villages behind it to see the families of people working there and to conduct interviews with people living locally but not employed there. This enabled me to explore local relationships to Choeung Ek and its use as a tourist site, including with several families of Chinese descent whose relatives were buried there before Democratic Kampuchea, and who remain buried there to date.

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who continued to refer to it as *Ângkar* throughout its rule and afterwards. The literature implies that *Ângkar* refers only to the Khmer Rouge, however, throughout my fieldwork people used the term to refer to any faceless authority: the company they work for, or the current government for example.

I worked primarily with the staff; key informants at the site were Bong La, Srey Srey, and Om Ta. Srey Srey had worked as a cleaner at Choeung Ek for several years when I arrived. Srey Srey feels lucky to have her job: the site is convenient – only a few hundred metres from her home - and the management welcoming, so whilst she cannot be at home during the day, her children come to the site to do their homework or play with the other children who live there. In her early thirties, she is a cheerful, friendly woman, who boosts her income by collecting plastic bottles left by tourists: for every six she collects she receives five cents from local recyclers; with the hundreds of tourists that pass through the site everyday, she can easily accumulate bottles, and she uses her extra income to pay for her children's school books and treats when they have worked hard. We would sit chatting during the day, and sometimes I would play with her children in their breaks from school. Her husband would pass us by on occasions, and occasionally her sister joined for lunch in her breaks from work close by.

Bong La was my first friend at Choeung Ek. In his early thirties, married, with three children, Bong La lives in Phnom Penh, commuting daily by motorbike. He was interested in the research I was conducting, and on days when I did not visit, would make a mental note of anything interesting that happened to tell me. After finishing school in the late 1990s he trained to be a tour guide in Phnom Penh, and later decided to base himself at Choeung Ek; he speaks excellent English, and good money was to be made from the increasing number of tourists. When the audio tour guides arrived in 2010, he, like most of the guides, transferred to that. Although he appreciates this work, Bong La misses his time as a tour guide: he is interested in the world and its people, and is a chatty, friendly man who enjoyed meeting new and varied people.

Om Ta, an elderly man who works at the site, lived through the Khmer Rouge. Born and raised close to Choeung Ek, he was evacuated during Democratic Kampuchea, to distant provinces. He lost many members of his family during the regime including, both parents, his aunt and her family, one sister and two brothers. Following the deposal of the regime in 1979 he returned to his home village, where he has lived ever since. First coming to the site with other villagers to loot its graves, he was subsequently employed as a caretaker, a role he retains today. Om Ta was one of the hardest working people at Choeung Ek, always in movement paying attention to one thing or another, stopping to collect debris, or moving around tools for the various construction workers who always seemed to be changing something.

Though these were my main informants, I spent time with several other members of staff. Om Ty, the site's director always made time to chat with me and answer any questions I had. Bong Broh, a caretaker, would tell me gossip about the tour guides from Phnom Penh as he carried out his work. I spent most of my other time with the guides who ran the audio tours. They manned a stationary point at the entrance of the site and I would sit, sometimes for hours, and chat with people as they worked. Prior to the introduction of audio guides at Choeung Ek in 2011, these men had been tour guides. They were personable and mostly enjoyed interactions with different people; several commented that was the reason they had become guides and that they missed this aspect in their new job (which involved simply handing out and taking back audio-players). I, therefore, offered the opportunity to chat and interact with an outsider that they no longer had in their day-to-day employment.

Though I worked primarily with the staff, I also spent some time with visitors to the site: when the coaches from the ECCC arrived my research assistant and I would join a group around the site, chatting with them as we went and I participated in any events held at the site, chatting with other participants also attendees. I interviewed several tourists, although all but one of these interviews (with a loquacious anti-abortion campaigner more interested in persuading me of his cause than engaging with my questions) were short – around 20 to 30 minutes.

Choeung Ek presented the opportunity to research the only state-sponsored mass grave memorial in Cambodia<sup>46</sup>, a memorial that remains an important site for local, national, and international encounters with the period. Though the public presentation of mass graves in Cambodia almost exclusively focuses on Choeung Ek, encouraging a tunnelled vision that this study hopes to help counteract, it was an important site to consider, particularly regarding the political forces acting on the graves. However, in order to counterbalance this tunnel visioning, another primary fieldsite was selected; an island I call Koh Sop.

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<sup>46</sup> Although Tuol Sleng also functions as a state memorial, the mass graves there are few and I would therefore not classify it as a mass grave memorial.

## Koh Sop

Koh Sop is one of a string of islands in the Bassac river that were used as prisons and killing sites during Democratic Kampuchea; the perfect materialisation of the regime's '*kuk et chonhcheang*': prison without walls. Small and unlabelled on many maps, it is nowadays a relatively unknown site, except to those who lived in the area during its regime.

Before Democratic Kampuchea Koh Sop was home to families from various nations, who lived peacefully side-by-side: the children learned each other's languages and the families socialised together. The soil was fertile and provided the ideal location for orchards of fruit trees: guava, oranges and lamot<sup>47</sup> were grown alongside rice-fields and family vegetable gardens. Some families had been there for several generations, others moved down in the 1950s and 60s from neighbouring islands running out of space. Along with those living on the island, people from across the river had farmland there, travelling daily to tend their fields and orchards.

The island was too small for a pagoda, but a small church was built in the middle of the land for those who practised Christianity and a preacher visited regularly from the mainland. Several *Neak Ta* (guardian spirits) inhabited the land – the Khmer *Neak Ta* remain, but those belonging to other nations left when they did in the 1970s.<sup>48</sup> The Khmer families also had *Neak Ta*, but were mostly Buddhist;

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<sup>47</sup> A sickly sweet kiwi-looking fruit with a texture somewhat like crystallised honey.

<sup>48</sup> *Neak Ta* are the Khmer guardian spirits of the land and water (see chapter two). Bong, a man of around 50 years old who had grown up on the island did not know the name of the foreign spirits, but told me their religion 'was like the Chinese religion, with a *Neak Ta*.'

they travelled across the river to visit the pagoda, for most only on ritual occasions such as *Pchum Benh* (the annual festival for the dead in October) and Khmer New Year in April. Bong, who was a child on the island before the regime, remembered it being a pleasant place to live. The only school was across the river on the Western side of the island, and before the civil conflict in the early 1970s, the children took a boat back and forth each day, until it became too dangerous to travel. Like many across Cambodia, their education was interrupted; many never went back. People earned their living through farming and after harvest and before the next set of planting, additional small jobs. Bong's father, for example, worked as a *pru-laan*: a hustler for the shared taxis that ran back and forth from Phnom Penh, while his mother took care of other people's cows.

Even through the US bombings and the civil conflicts of the 1960s, life was mostly quiet. By the early 1970s, however, this began to change. Even before their victory in 1975, the Khmer Rouge won control of some areas of Cambodia. Because it surrounded Phnom Penh, Kandal province was a hotly contested area between the soldiers of Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge and right from the beginning of the Lon Nol regime (1970 – 1975), the area was covered in conflict. Lon Nol soldiers were positioned on the Western side of the island, whilst the Khmer Rouge soldiers had a base on the Eastern side. In 1973, the Khmer Rouge won control of the Eastern side and the island (the Western side remained conflicted). Taking it as a base they evacuated the inhabitants downriver.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Some moved only one or two kilometres, whilst others moved towards the Vietnamese border; there was a degree of flexibility at this time and some choice left to the families leaving. Some walked to their new homes; others loaded ox-carts with goods and took them with them. Once they got to their new homes, life was normal for a time: people farmed and raised animals and lived in their own houses. Most of the foreign families had fled in the early 1970s, fearing the pogroms of the Lon Nol army.

## During Democratic Kampuchea

Following the evacuations in 1973, the island was used exclusively by the Khmer Rouge; initially as a barracks, and then as a prison and killing site. By early 1975, the Khmer Rouge had won complete control of the area, and with the fighting ended, some local inhabitants in the villages across the river returned to their homes there. Those from the island were permitted to the area, but had to live across the river. Their life was not so hard; 'We were old people (*brâcheachon chas*)' an elderly man from one village told me, 'so we could stay where we were.'<sup>50</sup>

Few people accessed the island during the regime, but Sok, who lives in a nearby village, was imprisoned there for a short time, and described the life to me one afternoon while we sat in the shade at the front of his house, where he has lived since liberation. Although he had been a soldier before the regime, once it came to power he disguised his past and was put to work with the Khmer Rouge youth group. One afternoon he was captured trying to sneak away to visit his mother. He was held for several hours, before being brought by boat to the island. On discovering he would be sent to Koh Sop he was terribly afraid. 'I knew it was hopeless' he told me, 'because I heard that if you got to Koh Sop there was no way back.'

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<sup>50</sup> Many of the people I spoke to in these villages had a relatively bearable experience during Democratic Kampuchea: the commanders in this area allowed most families to stay together, and although they were subject to the same regulations enforced across the country (such as communal eating, no ownership of individual property, and reduced rations) the people here had always been farmers and were used to hard work and long hours. Unlike those evacuated from the cities, therefore, they were better able to cope with the demands of the regime, and fared relatively better in health and losses than elsewhere.



On arrival at Koh Sop, prisoners were subject to interrogation, and many were tortured to draw up personal biographies that could be used to justify their execution (for being traitors or enemies of the regime). Sok had a good education, as did his parents, but he lied to protect himself:

They asked our names, where we used to study, what grade [we achieved], our parents' names... like that. And they asked our parents' profession.... I lied but I lied very well and I said I was at grade three, grade three national modern<sup>51</sup>. And they asked what I did; I said I helped my parents farming and they believed me.

During the day the prisoners, mostly young men, worked on the island, digging up tree roots to clear land for farming. Following their daily labour they were taken to wash in a small inland lake. At night they were shackled together in a large wooden hall. At Sok's head was a wooden bucket used as a urinal; when used the urine splashed his face. If they did anything to displease the guards (not coming quickly enough from bathing, or not working hard enough during the day for example) they were shot or beaten to death. Some were taken to the bamboo groves at the end of the island to be executed, others killed where they were. The bodies were left scattered across the land:

[the bodies were left] like rubbish, where they died; they were left where they were put. Sometimes they dug some dirt to cover them. Many of them were killed and they left the bodies here and there. The clothes, the blood, the hair were still fresh. They killed people all over the land.

Besides the prisoners, the only people living on the site were the Khmer Rouge soldiers running the site: all young cadre of late teens or early twenties. Its

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<sup>51</sup> Equivalent to UK year three; age eight or nine years old.

function was well known; people across the river sometimes saw the prisoners working ('they used people instead of cows to do the ploughing' an elderly woman from a village across the river told me), and it became well known that if you went to Koh Sop you did not return. Those working downriver reported seeing bodies floating in the water: though they wanted to retrieve them, they could not leave their workstations, and the bodies were soon washed along.

### **After 1979**

No one remembers exactly when the Khmer Rouge left the island and the areas around it, but in all probability it was shortly before the fall of Democratic Kampuchea on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1979; the site is en route to Phnom Penh from Vietnam. Bong's father was the first to return to the island; when he did he met a terrible sight. The land was covered with rotting cadavers and the time without farming had let the wildness encroach on the land. 'It was all jungle' he told me. The land was covered in freshly dug graves and piles of dead; corpses littered the shallow streams running the length of the island. The houses that had stood before had been dismantled - like Choeung Ek the materials were used to construct Khmer Rouge buildings: prison halls and dwellings for the cadre.

Bong and his family lived across the river during the regime and were eager to come home. Others were afraid to return - Khmer and Vietnamese military stationed themselves on the island, and many from the Eastern side reported seeing lights flying around at night, a sure sign of haunting ghosts. As the months passed a few families began to clear the land and re-establish their farming, but many did not return to live for quite some time. Even when people returned to their homes, some could not reclaim their old land; in the PRK, a system of land

distribution was initiated that apportioned land according to the number of people in your family: 'if you had four people, you got four hectares; if you were two people, you got two hectares' Bong explained.

As at Choeung Ek, the dead at Koh Sop proved useful in the new government's political legitimization. Under the same directive that guided collections elsewhere, the bodies that lay on the surface were gathered and piled high under a quinine tree in the centre of the island. At first the pits were not disturbed, but looters soon came to dig. People in many locations told me that groups of people travelled from site to site searching for valuables amongst the dead; Bong and his wife Srey explained this is what happened at Koh Sop. A group of men, travelling from Battambang (a province on the other side of the country), arrived soon after liberation and stayed for several months, camping on the island whilst they dug:

[Srey]: They came to find the bodies to find gold. For example: gold teeth or other gold that was on the body.

[Bong]: Sometimes the bodies had gold teeth, gold necklaces...

[Srey]: Sometimes [those killed] had sewn gold into their clothes...

[Bong]: Sometimes they just put gold in their clothes.

**[Caroline]: Which clothes?**

[Srey]: They put the gold in their bras.

[Bong]: They sewed a pocket and put their gold there.

[Srey]: And when these people were killed they hit them and the body fell down, but [the Khmer Rouge] did not look for anything.

[Bong]: After they finished finding gold here they travelled to another place.

Amongst the group was a goldsmith; he asked Bong and others to work for him, but Bong refused. 'I was too disgusted' he said. Others from the village had joined in and when people found gold the goldsmith bought it from them.

As they dug they piled the bodies on the surface in one big heap, arranging 'leg according to leg and head according to head.' The *p'teah khmouch* in which the remains were later housed was built at a later date, and the area where the graves were dug is now covered in houses. Not all the bodies were dug. Some remained, and when others moved to the area they covered them with soil and built on top. In the early years the ground moved with the dead: rising and cracking as the bodies bloated with decomposition; sinking when the rains came and compressed the land. The ground has mostly settled now, but sometimes after heavy rain depressions still appear; the land under Om Yay's house still moves and her dog occasionally tries to dig up the graves. In the early years after liberation bodies would often surface in the rivers or ponds, or in the ground as people ploughed for farming. Nowadays it is rare, but still occasionally happens. A few months before I arrived some bones were dug up in the field of Ta Chas, an elderly man who lives in the ancestral village of the island: he put them in a plastic bag and threw them into the *p'teah khmouch* (figure four), now empty except for a few bones left behind from when the remains were moved in the 1990s.



Figure four: Koh Sop *p'teah khmouch* (source: the author)

Sometime in the late 1990s, or the early 2000s, the remains within Koh Sop's *p'teah khmouch* were moved from the island to *cheddei* (stupa) at local pagodas. Though three pagodas took remains the majority went to the *wat* (pagoda) closest to the district office. They remain there today, locked in a small, unassuming *cheddei*, only opened at ritual occasions and on the request of visitors.

### **Koh Sop today**

Nowadays the island is split, both geographically and socially into two halves: the end of the island - home to families who lived on the site before Democratic Kampuchea or who come from across the river and have farmed land there for more than one generation, and the head of the island – three villages that began with NGO rehousing projects of the 1990s.

The island is home to 93 houses and a fluctuating number of inhabitants (averaging around 300 people). The end of the island is characterised by traditional wooden houses, and a few concrete ones, spaced apart from each other with farmland in-between. The other half, where most of the graves lay, is split into three villages, each made up of a row of houses crammed together. The houses are mostly one room wooden or palm-leaf stilted houses, with one or two brick houses for those families whose children work in the cities and send money home. Several small streams and various ponds cover the land and in the rainy season offer welcome fishing opportunities for many inhabitants.

There are no roads on Koh Sop, only dirt paths. Most people walk wherever they are going, although some people have bicycles and one or two of the wealthier families, motorbikes. A small ferry connects the island to the mainland on the Western side; on the Eastern side a land bridge connects the island in the dry season and in the wet season people travel by boat. When I was there mains electricity had not arrived on the island; those with electricity powered from batteries charged nightly at the NGO-run school from the solar panels on its roof. Water also runs only at the school: though most houses have wells dug in the 1980s, the water coming from them has high levels of arsenic, so most people use rain water collected in large urns besides their houses, or filter river water. Toilets are scarce: adults use the fields and the river; children seem to go wherever.

Those living on the end of the island mostly run farms, growing sa'om, mangoes, guava and corn. Most families have cows, used for farming and breeding; a few have chickens and one has sheep. At the head of the island many people do not work. A few families have plots in an NGO-led agricultural project, which runs in

the grounds of the former prison. One or two tend cows for people across the river: the grass is good on the island and ideal for raising calves.<sup>52</sup> A few men work construction, travelling to the nearby towns and cities, and some of the daughters work in the garment factories, coming home at the weekends. Many of the families rely on aid, without which they could not survive. Land insecurity is high at this end of the island: the local *Neak Thom* [important person - literally translating at big person] is slowly taking the land on the island, metre by metre, through appropriation and debt-collection housing swaps.



Figure five: farm at Koh Sop. After the regime bodies covered the land (source: the author)

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<sup>52</sup> Cows are hugely valuable in Cambodia and are used primarily for work and breeding. Because of their cost (when I was there a well-bred calf would sell for between \$500 and \$1,000) many people cannot afford to buy their own. Several people I knew therefore engaged in a system of cow-sharing; the poorer person tends a cow owned by someone else, and each year the cow gives birth the calf is given alternately to the owner and the person tending the cow. In this way poorer people can receive their own cow, and the people owning the cows have someone to look after and raise them, and also receive merit for helping others.

There is a Khmer run church, a small primary school, and a couple of small shops for buying the essentials. For everything else people travel across the river, where a small, bustling market runs daily outside the local pagoda. Most people at the end of the island practice Buddhism; at the head Christianity, though many still attend pagoda, and give offerings to *Neak Ta* (local guardian spirits), of which there are several on the island and in the river around it.

### **Researching at Koh Sop**

I chose Koh Sop for a number of reasons. In my first few months in Cambodia I visited several of islands listed as mass graves by DC-Cam, but when I asked people in the area for more information they would direct me to Koh Sop, telling me it was the largest and most brutal prison in the area. This, its return to everyday land used for housing and farming, and its small size and low population made it an ideal place for research: with only 93 houses I could easily talk to most families, though, of course, I spent most of my time with only a few.

A small NGO runs the island's school, and after contacting them, they offered support and a room at the school, which my research assistant and I shared throughout our time there. The school and its patrons are viewed very favourably on the island, and being associated with them gave me access quickly to the villages and their inhabitants. I taught English three mornings a week from 07:00 to 10:30, and during the school summer break ran art sessions for the children. Due to perceived security issues in the village, we were under curfew and had to return to the school by darkness, where we were locked in with the school caretaker and the two school dogs, however, during the day I spent most of my time in the village. We ate our dinner everyday at the house of one family, which



offered a wonderful opportunity for observing the village, particularly in the initial stages. It also provided my first key informant on the island, as Om Srey, whose house it was, would sit and chat with us, filling us in on all the gossip. The repeated walk to and from Om Srey's house also provided an ideal opportunity for getting to know people and watching the dynamics of the island. Although I remained almost entirely on the island, I occasionally travelled across the river to interview people in the villages surrounding it.

Other than Om Srey, I spent the majority of my time with the women and children on the island, not necessarily out of gender bias, but because they were the ones who were home during the day. Om Yay, Ming Yay, Srey Sabbay, and her husband Bu, befriended me as soon as I moved to Koh Sop. Srey Sabbay in particular would spend time with me and my research assistant, Phasy, and would give us eels she had caught or fruit from her garden. When I wanted to learn how to fish, it was she who took the time to teach this bumbling foreigner to wade the lakes to trap the eels and crabs that hid amongst the roots of the floating plants. When my research assistant and I were late returning to our room, she and her husband walked us home to make sure we arrived safely. These women would shout and invite me in as I walked past their houses, and if I was sitting chatting in one person's house, others would often join us. Most had lived on the island for years. Srey Sabbay and her husband Bu were some of the first to arrive, moving there in 1981 when Bu got a job guarding government land on the island. Om Yay and Om Srey arrived shortly afterwards, and Ming Yay arrived last of the group, coming in the late 80s.

As well as these women, children were often my research allies. Some might consider that on issues such as these children should not be involved, but the children at my research sites were living their own versions of this history, and I found their input sometimes interesting, often useful. They often took part in the interviews, encouraging the adults to talk openly about various issues. On several occasions when an adult was holding back, a child would pitch in: 'you should tell her everything,' or 'tell her about such and such.' The adults invariably did. The few men I worked with occurred primarily at the weekends. The headmaster of the local school was an important informant, and I spent time with him both at school and at his home. With both the headmaster and the women I worked with I could join in the ebb and flow of everyday life and participating in everyday activities such as teaching, fishing, harvesting, preparing food for sale at market or ceremonies, and other communal activities, encouraged trust and enabled me to build relationships with key informants.

They also offered rich opportunities for data collection as it was during these activities that people gossiped; I received much information on relationships and the workings of the village during such encounters (as explained by Gluckman (1963: 308), gossip is 'the very blood tissue of [community] life'). I felt I had achieved a level of acceptance when I was accepted in these circles, and after some time I noticed my presence being taken for granted<sup>53</sup> when informants stopped altering their interactions in my presence; I was inordinately pleased, for example, when one of my informants felt comfortable enough in my presence to

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<sup>53</sup> Like Oakley (2012: 81), I consider it a fallacy that anthropologists can become invisible, although after time and effort our presence and participation can be accepted and then taken for granted, offering a certain amount of inconspicuousness.

shout insults at another walking by. Through living and working with my informants on a daily basis, participating in their daily activities I had access to an 'intimacy of detail' (Lindisfarne in Okley 2012: 87) and this enabled me to explore how the graves are constituted 'in the ongoing indeterminacy and flux of ... life' (Csordas 1990: 40).

Though these daily encounters enabled me to modify my position as a complete outsider, the relationships I developed in Koh Sop were sometimes fractious. The foreigners who had visited the island before me were involved with charitable projects, and this association remained in the minds of many of the villagers, particularly those at the head of the island who regularly received such aid. It was almost impossible for me to go out without someone asking for money, or to pay for things, ranging from the modest purchasing of medicine, to the extravagant funding of a granddaughter's university education. I agreed to some of these requests, such as buying medicine for families I know are very poor, but most I refused. This affected some relationships: although some people just shrugged off my refusal, others refused to talk to me, some for a few days, a couple for my entire fieldwork. These constant applications made me feel uncomfortable and resentful: I felt exploited by those who asked for things repeatedly. I misinterpreted some relationships, considering friendships being built, whilst some people viewed me in a much more practical way. My feelings were a result of ignorance; a reflection of my own constructions of, and aspirations for, relationships in the field, but they also reflected the different socio-economic status of Koh Sop compared to most of my other fieldsites – the community there were the poorest I worked amongst, many living on less than \$1 per day. Once I

accepted these requests as part and parcel of life on the island, relationships, became much easier.

### **Other sites and particular methods**

Though those sites were my primary field-sites, I visited sixteen other mass gravesites across several different provinces<sup>54</sup>. I chose multi-sited research for two reasons: firstly it provided a means to explore links, commonalities and disjunctures between different sites, enabling a ‘cross-fertilisation of sites’ which provided inspiration to my ethnographic perspective (Gallo 2009: 90; Cook, Laidlaw and Mair 2009: 58). Secondly I aimed to provide a counterbalance to the public presentation of mass graves in Cambodia, which almost exclusively focus on one site: Choeung Ek, encouraging a tunnelled vision of the graves that this study hopes to help counteract. As Cook, Laidlaw and Mair (2012: 68) state ‘a valid ethnographic field need not correspond to a spatial entity of any kind, and need not be a holistic entity “out there” to be discovered’; the field of this study was constructed throughout the fieldwork, data analysis and writing, demarcated by my attempts to explore relationships and uses of mass graves in Cambodia, rather than at one specific site.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> These sites are: Banan, Wat Samrong, Wat Sampeau and Wat Ek Phnom in Battambang province; Chong Prasat, Khsach Sa, O Russei and Kampong Chhnang Airport in Kampong Chhnang province; Wat Kampong Tralach, Phnom Kampong Trach and a site I call Phnom Grahom in Kampot province; Koh Tmei and Po Tonle in Kandal province; Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh, and Tonle Bati and Kraing Ta Chan in Takeo province.

<sup>55</sup> However this research project is not peripatetic. That is not to say that each sites is examined as if a discrete, bounded entity (although I recognise Candea’s (2007) argument that all anthropological research requires some element of bounding, but that these bounds are arbitrary and selected by the researcher, and apply equally to theoretical considerations as much as to geographical spaces), nor is it to suggest that the places and people with whom this research interacts are complete, consistent, or that they represent anything other than themselves and their own experiences and understandings of mass graves. Rather that while gathering data from a range of locations, I situated myself in specific locales. Whilst Choeung Ek was selected for its

The sites for this study were identified from DC-Cam's<sup>56</sup> list of mass gravesites (appendix one) and advice from local people on accessibility, both physical and otherwise. In Kampot, for example, I was advised not to research in Angkor Chey, an area with a large number of ex-Khmer Rouge cadre, whom my local assistant considered hostile to such research. Though I could have found modes of working there, I followed the advice of my assistant, and was able to identify another site, that I call Phnom Grahom, which was an ideal location for working with ex-cadre. My visits to these sites were partly to assess potential fieldsites, however, I conducted preliminary research at all: collecting stories of the graves, their construction, people's memories of the regime, and local treatments of the graves in the years since the end of the regime. I returned over the course of my fieldwork to some sites, and I spent varying amounts of times at each, the longest being three weeks at Phnom Grahom in Kampot province. As a Khmer Rouge settlement it provided an ideal location for exploring the views of ex-Khmer Rouge on the graves and the dead.

While ethnographic research traditionally brings to mind long-term embeddedness in one location, this project provides a multi-sited ethnography in both literal and conceptual terms. As well as the physical localities, in examining the relationship between internal and external discourses<sup>57</sup> on mass graves, the

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position as a national memorial, the second and subsidiary sites could have been substituted with many others from across Cambodia.

<sup>56</sup> DC-Cam (Documentation Center of Cambodia) is a research organisation based in Phnom Penh that collects and publishes data and research on the Khmer Rouge regime. They were set up as the field branch of Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program in 1995, but became independent in 1997.

<sup>57</sup> I use discourse in the Foucauldian sense to refer to 'systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak,' (Lessa 2006: 3); the discursive rules in which knowledge is produced and reproduced (Hook 2001: 523).

discourses themselves, which are both ‘ultimately mobile and multiply situated’ (Marcus 1995: 102), became an object of study. Discourses on mass graves are inevitably global in that their imagined meanings exist throughout the world, particularly in light of several factors: films such as *The Killing Fields* (Joffe 1984), Choeung Ek’s presence as a major tourist site, and the ongoing UN-backed trials of the Khmer Rouge leaders – the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) – which are international trials of extreme importance in contemporary international criminal justice systems, being the first hybrid courts brought against perpetrators of crimes against humanity (Gray 2014).<sup>58</sup> This thesis therefore examines the multi-sitedness of both my research and the meanings attributed to them as objects of study.

### **My position**

As a foreign female I had a kind of liminal gender that enabled me to access both men and women, and as a foreigner I enjoyed a level of freedom not available to most Khmer. In addition, as an outsider some people liked to gossip with me, and fill me in on details of social dynamics, or teach me about Khmer history and culture, placing themselves in the position of cultural experts. This was particularly useful for me in the initial stages, allowing me to see how these informants wanted Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge period to be presented to an external, foreign audience. For some, it also offered a chance to have their story heard; this was particularly salient in rural sites.

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<sup>58</sup> In addition, my presence as an external researcher inevitably transformed this research into a multi-sited project, as I became an interlocutor in the socially constituted lived space of the mass graves.

The most difficult aspect of this, however, was the knowledge, power and access to authorities that many people presumed I had. Sometimes I could assist people; helping them understand their prescriptions and medication labels for example, or signposting them to authorities and NGOs who might be able to help them. However, there were many subjects in which I was impotent, and was left feeling not only helpless, but also like a let down to those who had asked for help. One young man, for example, asked me to persuade the police to open an investigation into the death of his father who had been killed in a car crash a couple of years before and the police had refused to investigate. No matter what I told him, he was convinced I could get the case opened and a fair investigation conducted.

### **Visual methods**

In addition to participant-observation, at the outset of this research I intended to use visual methods as a primary mode of data collection, and in particular had planned to make a collaborative film based on participatory methods. However, once in the field it quickly became apparent that making a collaborative or participatory film was not appropriate in either of my main sites – at Choeung Ek people were too busy with their work and had little free time to be involved (most worked six or seven days a week), and at Koh Sop, there existed many rivalries between the inhabitants. To select a few people to work with (even if they selected themselves) would have affected my relationships with other people, a risk I was not willing to take.

Visual methods did, however, continue to feature in my fieldwork. I used them as a research tool, as tools of enquiry, and as social enablers as gifts. I used GPS

mapping to chart my rural fieldsite and where graves lie in comparison to people's houses, schools and places of work as an initial means of understanding the landscape of the sites. Making this map proved to be a great facilitator in the village – though a few people were, at first seemed suspicious of my motives for mapping, some took it upon themselves to be my guide, offering advice and directions: this offered an interesting insight into the sights the people on the island deemed necessary to record, and those they omitted. I also mapped Choeung Ek. The mapping here had three functions: to see how the tourist interests fitted around the graves, to see how the already excavated graves lay in relation to the unexcavated ones, and to assess where all the mass graves were situated in relation to the Chinese graves which had been in the cemetery before it became a killing and burial site for the Khmer Rouge.

I filmed some of everyday life in the village at my rural site as an aide memoir,<sup>59</sup> but photography was my most important visual tool. I carried some type of camera everywhere, and photography became an 'ethnographic passport' (Marion 2010), both in the field and beyond it, providing a means of entrance to some informants, facilitating social rapport in the field, and extending beyond the fieldwork into my analysis and research presentation. It was particularly useful as a social enabler in Koh Sop. Many Cambodians have a collection of official portraits of themselves and their family, which are either displayed around the home, or kept safely stored. Ideally, these photographs are studio portraits taken by a professional photographer, however, this is expensive, and many of the

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<sup>59</sup> I also attempted to organise some participatory video workshops, however, despite several efforts, no adults were interested in participating in these, although I spent a fun and fascinating day with a group of small children using participatory methods to make a film called 'The revenge of Ndat' in which a murdered woman rises from the dead to take revenge on her killers by slaughtering them.



people I worked with could not afford it. I therefore organised afternoons of free portrait shooting at the school. I also photographed voraciously throughout my fieldwork, and where possible printed copies to distribute. This facilitated my fieldwork, easing my initial contact and social rapport by creating social relations with my informants. It also gave me a role within the village beyond researcher and teacher offering another avenue of entrance to the site.

Photo elicitation was a useful research method for particular topics, especially the display of human remains across the country. A powerful research tool, photo elicitation has the potential to provoke visceral, involuntary memories and embodied experiences (Harper 2002). This is useful in this project, mirroring, as it does, the Buddhist method of understanding - contemplation and meditation by close and repeated observation, without direct interference (notwithstanding the effect of the researcher) (Klima 2008). The public presentation of the dead from the Khmer Rouge is designed to be visually performative: their remains are piled in vast numbers at sites used during political campaigning and other ceremonial occasions (see chapters five to seven). I photographed memorial stupas at the sites I visited across Cambodia, and in certain interviews used these displays to explore this visual nature of the presentation of the Khmer Rouge dead. These provided rich insight into perceptions of the body, the dead, and the use of the dead of the Khmer Rouge for political and personal ends.

I use photographs throughout this text to provide visual representation of elements discussed and to illustrate aspects that may be unknown to the reader.

## Interviews

In addition to these techniques I conducted open-ended, interviews with 52 individuals throughout my fieldwork. Some were with key informants who I interviewed to record precisely specific recollections; others were one off interviews with people previously unknown to me. Except in a few, sensitive cases, all formal interviews were recorded, and the interviews transcribed and translated into English for later analysis. Where people were uncomfortable with being recorded, extensive notes were written during the interview, which were typed up immediately afterwards.<sup>60</sup> I interviewed people at least twice where possible: letting them take the lead in the first interview and tell me the story they wanted me to hear, then going back with follow up questions and specific enquiries later. With some officials only single meetings were possible, and for these I conducted more structured interviews, with set themes. I was careful to first approach village chiefs or other officials for permission to research before proceeding to work with other people. In identifying interviewees I primarily used the snowball method, using the social networks of informants already contacted to access others who could potentially contribute to this research (Mack et al. 2005: 5). In many instances it was the informants themselves who identified others. Sometimes they would call the person direct or go and collect them and bring them to me to interview. Occasionally I knew this was happening; on occasion a new person would simply arrive and be presented to me to interview.

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<sup>60</sup> Most people were happy to be recorded; however, some ex-Khmer Rouge were a little nervous. Given this, a decision was made before researching in Phnom Grahom not to record interviews there, but to transcribe instead.

Interviews were almost never one-to-one or in private spaces. Usually conducted outside, in the shady areas under people's houses, or in some communal space where we could sit and escape the sun, I spent my time in Cambodia surrounded by people and covered in children, dogs, cats and mosquitoes. As we talked, other people would join us, sometimes just watching, but more often than not interjecting and participating in the interview. Sometimes this was helpful: people were able to support each other, or debate particular questions amongst themselves, providing thought-provoking insights. However, it often added a performative element to the situation.

As I experienced increasing encounters with Buddhism and animism, I sought out people to explain their understanding of the concepts to me along with other precepts and practices that are influential in the lives of the people I lived and worked amongst, attempting to obtain the meanings of these contained within the *Dhamma* - the universal teachings of Buddha<sup>61</sup>, and the difference between this official doctrine and that being narrated to me by lay informants. I sought out and interviewed monks of varying levels: novices and ordained monks in both rural and urban pagodas and former monks who had left the *Sangha* (the Buddhist monastic community of monks and nuns). I spent a wonderfully informative afternoon with a Venerable Professor at the Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University, and although Tep Vong<sup>62</sup>, the Patriarch of Cambodian

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<sup>61</sup> Laid down for Theravada Buddhism in the Tipitaka – the Pali Canon.

<sup>62</sup> Tep Vong, officially titled *Samdech Preah Agga Mahā Sangharājādhīpati Tep Vong* - Foremost Great Supreme Patriarch Leader Tep Vong, is one the January 7th monks – the seven monks reinstated under the Vietnamese rule in 1980 as leaders of the re-established (although still tightly controlled) Buddhist Sangha following its destruction under the Khmer Rouge. Tep Vong is a somewhat controversial figure. He remains tightly entwined with the politics of Cambodia's ruling party, and has, in the past, condoned the use of violence by the Cambodian government, arguing that it is allowed under Buddhism (Harris 2001).

Buddhism was always too busy to meet with me, his secretary, a monk of many years experience, gave me two interviews.

In addition to the members of the *Sangha*, I spent much time with lay-experts: I interviewed a poet and advisor within the Ministry of Cult and Religion, several *âchar* (lay Buddhist priests) and a couple of lecturers from the Buddhist university. I also interviewed several Muslim Khmer at the Tuoltompong Mosque; I attempted to interview Imams in Phnom Penh, but all appointments were cancelled at the last minute so a *dûcha* (teacher of Islam) spoke with me instead. To access other religions I was lucky in my research assistants: my three primary assistants (who each worked with me for several months) were Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. There is not one leader for the Christian followers in Cambodia, but I interviewed a Khmer priest from my rural site and Sompoah, my first research assistant was Christian, so I also accessed her knowledge.

After conflict much is made of the ‘victims’<sup>63</sup>, and an often simplistic dichotomization of suffering presented of innocent victims and evil perpetrators. To try and avoid this, as well as researching with people who classify themselves as ‘victims’ I was conscious to work with former cadre. This proved to be easier than I expected: a level of impunity exists within Cambodia that not only enables ex-Khmer Rouge cadre to live freely in the community, but also means that several officials in the country are ex-Khmer Rouge, and that people can speak,

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<sup>63</sup> I find the term ‘victim’ highly problematic, being so value loaded and influential in people’s reactions. The moral dichotomy implied by the terms perpetrators and victims suggests a distinction not only between people, but between bad and good; guilt and innocence; deceit and honesty; distrust and reliability. Having worked in mass grave investigations, I am highly conscious of the fact that after such a regime as the Khmer Rouge, people quickly re-label themselves, and everyone becomes a victim and adopts the rhetoric of suffering that accompanies it. Whilst a level of impunity exists in Cambodia that allows people to acknowledge their membership in the regime with little consequence, most of the people I encountered were highly aware of the political nature of presentations.

though usually in guarded terms, about their time as a cadre (see chapter five). I knew beforehand that some of the people I interacted with were ex-Khmer Rouge; others I found out about later. Some would tell me immediately, using euphemisms to describe their affiliation, ranging from the opaque 'I fought in the forest,' to the transparent 'I was a soldier of Khieu Samphan' (President during Democratic Kampuchea, and one of the three Khmer Rouge leaders tried at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia – the ECCC). With others it became clear as interviews or interactions went on: some mention of a slogan they would sing, or a discussion of their work during the regime would make it clear they had been cadre. Although usually uncalculated, I had the distinct impression that sometimes this use of euphemisms or disclosures during conversation was done to test me: both my knowledge (did I know what the euphemism meant?) and my reaction (would I judge the interviewee?). I tried not to judge; the distance in time since these events made that somewhat easier.<sup>64</sup> Though he appears infrequently in this thesis, I was granted access to conduct an interview with Comrade Duch (Kaing Guek Eav): former commandant of Tuol Sleng prison, at Kandal provincial prison, where he is serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity, torture, and mass murder.

### **Language and the use of research assistants**

The role of research assistants is often obscured in anthropological texts, obfuscated under terms such as cultural mediator, key informant, or enablers (Middleton and Cons 2014). Borchgrevink (2004) argues that a myth exists within anthropology that 'true' anthropological research can only be obtained by those

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<sup>64</sup> In addition, many of the ex-cadre I came to know were very kind and open to me: the village I was made the most welcome in and at which I felt the most secure and the least exploited was a Khmer Rouge re-settlement village.

with fluency, and whilst many anthropologists use research assistants, their obscuring is the result of a fear of criticism. Gupta (2014: 394) states that: 'successful ethnographic work depends upon a wide range of collaborations,' a central one of which is often the research assistant. Considered collaborations with my research assistants enabled the research I conducted.

The language of Cambodia is Khmer, a language derived from a mixture of Sanskrit and Pali. Prior to leaving for the field I took Khmer lessons at SOAS, and on arrival I enrolled in an intensive course at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. For three months I went every morning to the University. I also took Khmer conversational lessons once a week with a group of other new ex-pats. We learned the basics, and I would practice in my daily life. Making a deal with a moto driver to take me daily to the university provided a great opportunity: Bu Moto was patient and allowed me to practice on our daily commute. After this initial phase, I continued with lessons throughout my time in Cambodia. Once I moved to the field my research assistants taught me aspects of the language, and I would have formal lessons whenever I was back in the capital. Many interviews were transcribed together, and I learned a lot through this, and of course, through the daily research.

Throughout my time in Cambodia I had two primary research assistants, Sompoah, a graduate of University in Thailand, who I worked with from January – June 2013, and Phasy, a graduate of the Asian Women's University in Bangladesh, who I worked with from July – December 2013. I also worked frequently with Bunnwath, who was working on an undergraduate degree in social sciences and is himself somewhat of an expert in spirits and the dead having previously worked

alongside my colleague Paul Christensen researching spirit mediums across the country. In addition, when working at different locations, I endeavoured to work with someone local or with prior connections to the site, because their established links and networks of trust were great facilitators in gaining access to informants and providing locally particular knowledge. This was especially true when working in Phnom Grahom, at which attempting research without a local gate-keeper would have been impossible, due to the nature of the village - a Khmer Rouge re-settlement village - and the timing of the research - just before the general elections, when the horrors of the Khmer Rouge period were highly visible due to election campaigning (see chapter seven) and threats were being made to prosecute all former Khmer Rouge officers.

I worked closely with my research assistants, who were trained by me, and with whom I had a good level of trust<sup>65</sup>. Encounters were usually three-way, between my informants, my research assistant, and me. As Middleton and Cons (2014) note, research assistants are more than 'mere ciphers' of knowledge; they provide an extra set of eyes and ears in the field: my local assistants provided local knowledge and insight, and all were a great resource for me to check assumptions, test data, and to correct and teach me on modes of interaction.<sup>66</sup> In Koh Sop, having a research assistant with me at all times also provided an element of security in a location where violence against women, including rape, was

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<sup>65</sup> Made explicit in a myriad of ways, but most tellingly, when, on arrival in Koh Sop, Phasy, who had been chatting with the school's Headmaster, told me that he had told her not to tell me anything negative that she over-heard: I should only be told the positive stories. Phasy never adhered to this request, and nor, after a while, did the Headmaster.

<sup>66</sup> On a purely personal note, Phasy, my assistant in Koh Sop, also provided companionship and security in the somewhat unstable location we were staying in. She was also a first-class cockroach hunter, which helped no end when one managed to crawl under our mosquito net to nibble on my toes in the night: as I panicked and tried to squeeze myself into a corner Phasy calmly picked up the roaches and took them outside, where she squashed them. In return I protected her from the over rambunctious puppies and dogs in the village of which she was cautious.

considered a threat. The data collected for this thesis, therefore, and the 'field' within which I worked, emerged through the three-way dynamic of my assistants, my informants, and my own encounters at each site. My research assistants are 'part and parcel of the social ontology of the field' (ibid: 282), which was 'constituted by the network of connections and linkages forged in doing fieldwork' (Gupta 2014: 399).

### **A note on writing**

My data analysis was a continual, ongoing process throughout and post fieldwork because 'fieldwork is continuously analytic in character, as fieldnotes are always products of prior interpretive and conceptual decisions, and, hence, are ripe with meanings and analytic implications' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011: 198). While transcribing interviews and going over notes in the field I noticed emerging themes, which helped direct subsequent research. On returning from the field, and prior to writing, I undertook further analysis of my data. I re-assessed all recorded material, and, organised it into primary themes. Some topics were made apparent by key events, some appeared in the minutiae of everyday encounters within my fieldnotes, and others came from analysis of my transcribed interviews. I used Nvivo<sup>67</sup> to organise the transcribed material and do some basic coding, which was a useful initial organiser, however, it cannot explore connections and disjunctures between data, and tends to generalise individuals and specific encounters which may be ethnographically vital (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011: 216); I used it primarily to revisit and reacquaint myself with the data, some of which had been collected more than eighteen months previously.

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<sup>67</sup> Qualitative data analysis software.



This dissertation is an ethnographic thesis, and as such it is a crafted story developed to my own ends, where events are made meaningful through my interpretation (Geertz 1973a; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011: 199). It developed out of fieldwork, which was as much embodied as it was informed by narrative, however, being textual, the thesis ultimately relies on narrative structures to communicate its findings. This presents a tension in that the experiential elements of study can little be presented through the rhetorical devices available in writing (Atkinson 1992) and must be wrestled into some intelligible story communicable through text. The writing of this thesis, therefore, is as much of a method as the fieldwork was.

### **What's in a name?**

Recent work in the social sciences has questioned the practice of making informants anonymous, arguing it to be a form of neo-colonialist practice, a de-humanising convention that reduces people to data (Absolon and Willett 2005; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Part of the violence of the Khmer Rouge regime was to render all people anonymous, classifying them into classes with no individual recognition (Gray 2014: 66). However, Cambodia is a country still rife with violence, not least political violence against dissenters and many of my informants were afraid to talk about issues they deemed political. Therefore, whilst I recognise the above arguments, I consider the need for protection to be imperative and have therefore followed the anthropological convention of only naming those requesting to be named. All others have been renamed with either generic names in place of their own (such as Lōk Om - a term of respect used to address older men, or Bong Srey meaning older sister for example), or common

Khmer names (such as Soth, Samnang, or Chan for example). Others have been named by their role (Monk, Âchar and so on). As a further attempt to disguise identities, some people have been merged to create composite characters, whilst others have been split to produce multiple persons. I have not renamed Choeung Ek, however, the other sites visited have been retitled, and their locations obscured as far as possible without completely removing integral features.

## Section Two: Digging up the Dead

### Chapter two: Spiritual remains - caring for the dead

If I think about those who died in the forest, they are in the heat, scratching about everywhere. I walked to many provinces where I was evicted to from January first till June first. I saw the dead everywhere. These dead we collected; it is lucky for them.

*- Ta Ta, on the housing of remains in state sponsored stupa*

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The dead are vital beings that interact with the living and help regulate society and maintain moral order in post-conflict Cambodia. Hundreds of thousands of dead lie in the mass graves caused by the Khmer Rouge; as we saw in previous chapters, the majority of these remain where they were buried, and the spaces of their death have been re-appropriated into everyday life. Living with the dead is accepted as part of everyday life across much of Cambodia; over time they have changed in status from being dangerous entities of fear to harmless beings.

The next three chapters concern these dead, examining their treatment and how relationships with them have changed, and exploring how the mass dead killed during the regime have been re-integrated into society through informal uses of the religious and ritual systems of animism and Buddhism. By describing the everyday interactions between those killed and the living, these three chapters will show how, in opposition to the government's commodification of the dead as

instruments in state politics and the building of a 'new' Cambodia, local people have reintegrated the dead into the social system, and by doing so, have found their own ways of remembering and re-connecting with them, ways that provide comfort, stability and security, and ways that enable them to resist the state appropriation of the dead as nameless entities.

The intertwined systems of Buddhism and animism are integral in this re-integration of the dead. This chapter examines these, discussing the features within each that enable people to use them today to understand, narrate, and deal with the Khmer Rouge period and its ongoing legacy. It explains the ways in which those killed under the Khmer Rouge regime are (or were) cared for, examining their ritual treatment, and describing how this has now been integrated into the Khmer annual cycle. By doing so it lays the groundwork for the next two chapters which examine specific ways in which the dead and the living related to each other, and how they have been reincorporated into social life today, first by looking at the changing relationships between ghosts (*khmouch*) of those killed and the living (chapter three), and then examining the specific concepts of reincarnation and karma (chapter four).

In order to do this, this chapter will first provide a brief overview of the place of Buddhism and animism in Cambodia, and how these were affected (or not) by Democratic Kampuchea. It will next describe funeral rites and other rituals related to the dead that attend to those killed under the regime, before considering the difference between those killed under the regime, and those killed now. It will show how the responsibility of caring for skeletal remains of the

dead (which no longer represent the individual) has been delegated to the state, whilst people care for their relatives spiritually through the annual cycle of rituals.

### **Buddhism and animism in contemporary Cambodia**

Since the Thirteenth Century the state religion of Cambodia has been Theravada Buddhism. Whilst I am mindful of the seductive appeal of depictions of it as being all encompassing (either before or after Democratic Kampuchea), Buddhism is significant to many Khmer people's lives, as well as to community life in general. 95% of the population self-identify as Buddhist (NIS 2012), and except in a tiny minority of locations, the Buddhist pagoda is a central element of most villages and is where most communal and community events occur, such as voting, village meetings, ritual and family-based ceremonies. The Khmer annual calendar revolves around the Buddhist ritual cycle, and many of the practices of Buddhism infuse the everyday life of the Khmer population, even those following other religions. My research assistant, a Chvea Muslim<sup>68</sup>, recounted visiting the pagoda every year as a child at New Year and sometimes other ritual days. She told me that it is common (in her village at least), for Muslim funeral ceremonies to be held on the first, seventh and 100th day, a practice inherited from Buddhism. In Koh Sop, several people had converted to Christianity in the years since Democratic Kampuchea: most still, however, visit the pagoda on ritual occasions; 'we don't burn incense, so it's ok', one of my informants told me. Another said 'the Bible said that if we believe in God, we are allowed to celebrate any ceremonies as long as we do not burn the incense.'

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<sup>68</sup> Many people automatically assume all Muslim Khmer are Cham – an ethnic minority from Southeast Asia, who make up around 1.6% of the Khmer population (NIS 2008), when in fact they are a mixture of Cham and Chvea Muslims.

Buddhism is intertwined with animism; the two are interdependent and cannot be disconnected. As Alexandra Kent (2003: 12), who has worked extensively on the subject, explains: ‘the monks share the cosmology of local people: an understanding of the pathogenic implications of neglecting ancestors or breaking codes of conduct, the powers of the various kinds of spirits...’<sup>69</sup> The *Neak Ta*, the guardian spirits who form its core, are as central to social and community life for many communities as the pagodas are; indeed, many pagodas have a *Neak Ta* that looks over them (O’Lemmon 2014). In 1988 Ang Chouléan noted that Buddhism was superimposed onto a pre-existing animist background, populated by an assortment of spirit beings (Chouléan 1988) and in examining the revival of Buddhism after Democratic Kampuchea, Alexandra Kent explains that ‘the two systems operate symbiotically in the popular milieu’ (Kent 2003: 13). My own fieldwork found this still to be the case, perhaps even more so nowadays. With a widespread distrust of government and state institutions, there has been a resurgence of rituals for the guardian spirits that were difficult to conduct whilst the country was still in conflict in the 1980s and 1990s (Zucker 2006; O’Lemmon 2014), and new spirit mediums (*Kru boramey*) and ceremonies for them have been established (Christensen 2014). For many of my informants, attending pagoda and engaging in Buddhist practices was important on particular ritual occasions (such as New Year and *Pchum Benh*)<sup>70</sup>, however, more important in their everyday lives was maintaining positive relationships with the local *Neak Ta*; as custodians of the land and water it is they who influence the well-being and stability of everyday life.

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<sup>69</sup> The two systems are so intertwined that terms used to address the elders in each are identical – *Lōk Ta* for example, is a form of address used to refer to Venerable monks; it is also the term used to name many of the tutelary spirits (also known as *Neak Ta*).

<sup>70</sup> These ceremonies will be discussed later in this chapter.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, an (almost successful) attempt was made to eradicate Buddhism. Viewed as a foreign corruption, whose leaders were highly influential in their communities, and vocal in their political affiliations, it posed a threat to the new order (Harris 2001) and the Khmer Rouge made every effort to dismantle it. Monks were disrobed, exiled, or killed, and pagodas appropriated as holding and killing sites. Rituals were forbidden, Buddhist icons destroyed<sup>71</sup> and people found practicing Buddhism, or any semblance of it, were executed for disobeying *Ângkar*.

Perhaps because it is not entrenched in institutions, but situated in the landscape itself, animism suffered no such persecution.<sup>72</sup> Although rituals were forbidden (and as a consequence a few *Neak Ta* grew hungry and died), animism was tolerated. Some Khmer Rouge cadre continued to seek advice from spirit mediums<sup>73</sup> and protection from the *Neak Ta*. Sometimes this took the form of human sacrifices: in her memoir, Sitha Nao recalls a local *Kru* being called on for advice about building a dam – with no construction experts, the dam kept collapsing, and many people died during its construction. The *Kru* determined

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<sup>71</sup> Heads were chopped off statues of the Buddha, and others smashed in religious sites across the country. The remnants remain in many locations and have become objects of worship once again used; the headless remains eerie reminders of the attempt to destroy old Cambodia.

<sup>72</sup> Although nowadays it is heavily implicated in political affairs with the King and important politicians consulting *Kru* (spirit mediums) to consult the *Neak Ta* on affairs of state as well as personal matters.

<sup>73</sup> Spirit mediums have many names in Cambodia. The over-arching term for all mediums is *Kru boramey*; *Kru* translates to master/teacher, and *boramey* refers to the spiritual power *pāramī* (*boramey*) that they access. A *Kru* can be a teacher, a medium, as well as the spirit that possesses a particular medium. The type of medium my informants usually spoke about were *Kru joal rūb* – *joal rūb* translates as ‘enters the body;’ these mediums are possessed by specific *Neak Ta* who pass knowledge from the spirit world on to their mediums. Because of that, *Kru joal rūb* are usually also *Kru Neak Ta*. They should not, however, be confused with *Kru Khmer* (traditional healers) or *Kru Tiey* (astrologers / fortune tellers) neither of which usually access the spirits. Paul Christensen, who works on Khmer mediums also came across other types of *Kru*, including *Kru khmouch*, *Kru arak* and *Kru beysat*, all of which access the spirits but are not possessed by them (Christensen 2015), however, my informants never spoke of these.

that the *Neak Ta* (a crocodile spirit) owning the river required the sacrifice of three pregnant women: three were selected and thrown to their deaths amongst the crocodiles (Nao 2013: 84-86). In her ethnography of the re-ordering of moral life in contemporary Cambodia, Eve Zucker (2013) reports people being buried in the foundations of a dam in Kampong Speu for similar reasons. Cadre I interviewed talked about asking the local *Neak Ta* for protection and receiving medicines and amulets from the local *Kru* – several explained this is why they had survived in the jungle for so long. Many of the *Neak Ta* survived because of this patronage, but also because there is no way to destroy them: they own (and are part of) the land, mountains, rivers and oceans, and represent no external authority.

As previously mentioned, the anthropological record shows us that the dead are usually re-integrated into the lives of the living through structured rituals of death and mourning. The banning of rituals and other Buddhist practices could be assumed to have caused much distress to those surviving the Khmer Rouge, particularly because of the huge numbers of dead left around the country. In his classic study on the rites of passage, van Gennep (1960 [1908]: 160) states that those dead who have not have appropriate rituals conducted for them are miserable:

Like children who have not been baptised, named, or initiated, persons for whom funeral rites are not performed are condemned to a pitiable existence, since they are never able to enter the world of the dead or to be incorporated into the society established there. These are the most dangerous dead. They would like to be reincorporated into the world of the living, and since they cannot be, they act like hostile strangers towards it. They lack the means of subsistence which



the other dead find in their own world and consequently must obtain them at the expense of the living.

Rituals are catalysts of processes that enable the re-imagining of social networks and re-establishment of stability following the rupture that death causes (Rosaldo 1989). They are used to ensure continuity in social systems through managing processes that remake kinship, reconfigure hierarchies and establish new order. Periods of war, or other social catastrophes such as disaster cause deaths outside these social systems, producing 'unhappy dead'; beings stuck in 'perpetual liminality' (van Gennep 1960 [1908]) who are forced to exist in continual suffering because they cannot move on to their correct plane of existence. It is only with proper ritual care that their suffering can be alleviated. In Vietnam, following the massacres at My Lai and Ha My, for example, many living people suffered pain and shame because they had been unable to care for their dead relatives properly: those killed were initially buried in mass graves in farmland, and following the end of the war, were hastily reburied in the forests and sand dunes, because the ancestral family burial grounds were destroyed during the conflict (Kwon 2006: 47 - 50). For other survivors of the Vietnam War, the burial of relatives in war-hero monuments caused on-going anguish to the living, because, being in state sponsored tombs of martyrs; they were unable to fulfill their obligations to the dead by feeding them (Kwon 2008b). In East Timor, the forcible relocation of people following the military invasion by Indonesia in 1975 meant that people were unable to attend properly to the spirits who reside in the landscape. In addition the years of civil conflict ensuing thereafter resulted in huge numbers of dead who could not be properly buried. This led to a landscape of danger – filled with a spiritual potency known as *lulik*. After being able to

return to their homelands in the 1990s, people were eager to re-establish positive relationships with the land spirits to provide protection from those spirits saturating the landscape and increasing the danger of *lulik* (Bovensiepen 2009).

### **The grievous dead**

This is because those who die in such violent circumstances usually become grievous dead. The grievous dead are the cause of much social unrest. Their liminal status causes them to interject into the lives of the living, sometimes in extremely disruptive ways: bringing bad fortune, illness, even death. In *After the Massacre* (2006), Kwon describes the spirits of people who have suffered a 'grievous death' in Vietnam, as being 'stuck': as ghosts not spirits; between the inside dominion of the house or tomb and the outside domain of the street or the world; between this world and the next. This is particularly the case for those buried en masse, the physical confusion of which traps the dead. The unhappy ghosts are sources of stress for the local people – survivors suffer guilt and shame in the empathy and shame they feel at their improper burial and unhappy state of the dead. One person commented (Kwon 2006: 121):

That's not a proper life; that's not a life at all.... Once in a while, particularly the first lunar month, the shame came back and induced terrible pain in me.'

In order to free these dead from their suffering, people across Vietnam started to rebury them; at Ha My and My Lai, moving them from hastily dug mass graves to communal burials<sup>74</sup>, and in other locations across Vietnam from the massive

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<sup>74</sup> Where those 'grievous dead' are the result of a massacre (as occurred in Ha My and My Lai) reburial is often to a communal memorial site, however, unlike in cases where a collective memorial site serves to provide collective identity (particularly of victimhood) that may be

heroes cemeteries to individual family tombs. These movements freed the dead because they provided a proper burial, and enabled the living to give proper care and attention to the dead in a way that was not possible in either mass graves or the state war memorials. In Thailand, annual rituals by Chinese immigrant populations dedicated to relieving 'restless ghosts' – those spirits of the 'unfortunate dead' (Formoso 1996: 218) - are commonplace, and both the immigrant Chinese and local Thai populations take part.<sup>75</sup> If not laid to rest, the unfortunate dead 'become restless ghosts who haunt the human world and threaten the social order as well as individual' (ibid: 220). This parallels the case in Timor Leste, where many of the spirits of those who killed in conflicts with Indonesia remain restless in the land, particularly where they were not properly buried (Bovensiepen 2009: 336). In some cases the dead are lonely, in others hungry, in others vindictive and angry, and seeking revenge.

In Cambodia the unhappy dead (*khmouch dtai hong* – literally meaning corpses of violence) are those who have died unexpectedly, usually in tragic circumstances for which neither they, nor their loved ones, were prepared: a car crash or a murder for example. These are liable to become either malevolent spirits of mischief and mayhem (*preay*), who disrupt the social order and cause problems to both individuals and groups, or ghosts (*khmouch*) who are trapped waiting for their rebirth (Chouléan 1988). These spirits, according to Ang Chouléan, can be calmed, but are rarely completely placated, and annual ceremonies are required

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welcomed by relatives, friends, and other interested parties (Potočari in Bosnia-Herzegovina for example), in Vietnam the communal site served a purely state function that stood in contestation to everyday people's needs and desires.

<sup>75</sup> Although Formoso argues that some Thai people take part in order to weigh down the immigrant Chinese population with the malevolent ghosts of their unfortunate dead.

to manage them, preventing them interfering in people's lives, causing illness, misfortune and even death in extreme cases.

One would expect the dead from the Khmer Rouge to fall in to this category. Those executed or tortured suffered sudden and violent deaths. Although the deaths of those dying of disease and / or starvation were often slow and torturous, they too died '*khmouch chikkei*' (like dogs - literally translated as 'dead dogs') - without ceremony. Indeed, some researchers have asserted that the spirits of those who died during the regime fall into such categories, and are therefore frightening and threatening entities to living Khmer. Rachel Hughes (2005: 276), who undertook research at Choeung Ek, declared that:

In cases of violent or accidental death it is widely believed that the spirit of the deceased remains in the place of death as a spirit or ghost, instead of moving on to the realm of re-birth. Ghosts may harm the living by causing great sickness and misfortune. In light of this belief, many Cambodians consider Choeung Ek a highly dangerous place and refuse to visit the Memorial.

This assertion presumes that the dead of those who died during the Khmer Rouge regime are viewed in the same way, and have the same powers, as those who die now, and are therefore subject to the same emotions, actions, and rituals, because these dead have remained static in their disposition and identity. However, this is not the case; whilst the dead were initially frightened and threatening to the living, the relationships have changed over time and they have long since been powerless, or have moved on to their next lives (see chapters three and four). To understand relationships with the Khmer Rouge dead, we must first examine the difference between them and those who have recently

died, because it is in these distinctions where their employment as entities of political power and social action becomes possible. This is best introduced with a short story from my fieldwork.

When I had been in the country about six months, Soth, a friend's colleague, went missing from Phnom Penh. Heavily in debt, people at first presumed he had run away or even killed himself, to avoid the loan sharks to whom he owed a large amount of money. When his body was discovered a couple of days later it became clear that he had been murdered. His family, having little money to pay for an investigation<sup>76</sup> and therefore no legal requirement to keep the body, had him cremated on the day he was found. When I asked why the cremation had taken place so quickly, my friend told me that they were afraid of the consequences of allowing his spirit to wander because he was *khmouch dtai hong*, and therefore liable to become a dangerous spirit that could harm the family.

Usually seven days of rituals follow the death of a person in Cambodia.

Sometimes this period may be extended (particularly in the case of prestigious and powerful people), but throughout it, the corpse is very carefully cared for and particular rituals conducted to free the spirit from the corpse and enable it to move on to its next life, which occurs on the seventh day when the corpse is

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<sup>76</sup> The police force in Cambodia is highly corrupt. Unless there is a high level of international interest, investigations often only occur if the family or other interested parties can pay. The more money given, the better quality investigation is conducted (or at least the more findings occur). One of my informants told me that the lowest amount of money accepted is \$50, but usually the police expect more. In a country where the minimum wage was \$76 pcm when I was there, this is completely unaffordable, and many crimes, even extremely violent crimes go uninvestigated. For example, three years before I arrived in my village, a seven-year-old girl was raped. She knew the teenagers who raped her, but her mother could not afford to pay the police to come and investigate. She borrowed \$100 and attempted to sue the family whose son was involved, however, they refused to go to the court. On approaching the village and district chiefs they told her there was nothing they could do. Three years on she is still paying off the debt, and her daughter has to live on the island with the boys who raped her. Unfortunately this is not an uncommon type of story.

appropriately disposed of – usually via cremation (Davis 2009). In the seven-day period between death and disposal, the spirit poses a threat because it does not realise it is dead, and therefore may try to return to its home and family. The strict rituals prevent this threat being played out. If someone dies suddenly in a violent manner, however, their spirit is not only confused, but there is the additional risk that the spirit may become a *preay* or other kind of malevolent spirit that stays close to the living. In this case, it is preferable to cremate or bury the person as soon as possible, and conduct the rituals after the cremation, so that the spirit can move quickly away from the family and household. When Soth was found to have been murdered, the family was afraid his spirit would pose a threat to them; they therefore had him cremated as soon as they could, whilst still performing the rituals that would normally be undertaken over the seven days in order to provide proper ritual care.

The dead from the Khmer Rouge, however, are a different story. Although most died violently - *khmouch dtai hong* – and without proper ceremony - *khmouch chikkei* - they are so long dead that they long ago became powerless: they are *sap* (literally tasteless) - powerless, and unable to haunt. A recently deceased spirit only remains dangerous to the family and household in the seven days following its death, in the period when it does not realise it is dead and therefore tries to come home.<sup>77</sup> As we will see in chapter three, most of those who died under the Khmer Rouge did not become malevolent spirits, and although some were disruptive in the years immediately after the regime, they were soon reintegrated into reciprocal relationships with the living, and have long since become

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<sup>77</sup> A recent trend, particularly in Northern Cambodia, is the construction of scarecrows to frighten away bad spirits. These scarecrows are primarily for bad spirits who exist in the landscape, however, they can also be used as an extra preventative measure in the seven days after death to protect a house or village.

powerless or died and been reborn. The incredulity of my informants whenever I asked about the dangers of the Khmer Rouge dead was obvious; one explained: 'I'm scared of the people who die now. Bones (*ch-ang*) have been dead for a long time. I'm not scared of them. But *khmouch*<sup>78</sup> just died. The others are bones - why should we be scared of them?' This is partly because the dead of the Khmer Rouge were not considered in the same way as contemporary dead, but more like *Neak Ta* in their inhabitation of the landscape and reciprocal relations with the living, and partly because of the flexible nature of Khmer Buddhism, which enabled rituals to resurge and reform to deal with the ruptures of the Khmer Rouge regime after its demise.

Theravada Buddhism allows funeral rites to be conducted without the corporeal presence of the corpse, and there are four acceptable modes of disposal of the dead: abandonment in the forest, abandonment in water, cremation, and burial (Davis 2009: 80).<sup>79</sup> Whilst cremation and burial are preferred in contemporary Cambodia (cremation by *Khmer Sot*: pure Khmer, burial by *Khmer-Chen*: Khmer-Chinese), the other forms remain valid where necessary. The dead of the mass graves, many of whom are within forests and / or water (many bodies were dumped in wells, ponds, or irrigation canals), are not necessarily trapped in inappropriate burials. There was, therefore, not the same urgency to locate the dead as in Vietnam or East Timor following their conflicts, and no need to rebury the dead.

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<sup>78</sup> See chapter three for discussions on *khmouch*.

<sup>79</sup> Readers seeking a more detailed description and analysis of funeral rites in contemporary Cambodia should refer to Erik Davis's (2009) thesis, *Treasures of the Buddha: Imagining Death and Life in Contemporary Cambodia*.

## Care of those killed under the Khmer Rouge

During the regime formal rituals for the dead were impossible. Even immediately after the regime during the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) although attention was paid to re-establishing pagodas, Buddhism was still strictly controlled. The numbers of monks were limited<sup>80</sup> and few formal ceremonies occurred. The seven monks reordained in the period immediately after the regime's demise to lead Khmer Buddhism were those with allegiances to Vietnam, and although some monks returned to Cambodia, novitiates were banned until the late 1980s. Although the dead caused some disturbance in post-DK Cambodia, no state-led rituals were conducted, and while a few informal, local ceremonies were organised, in the majority of locations none occurred. As time moved on, the dead became calmer, and their relationships with the living changed. Nowadays care for the physical remains of those killed under the Khmer Rouge has been devolved to the state, and spiritual care has been subsumed into the Buddhist annual ritual calendar.

## Care for the physical remains

As we saw in chapters one and two, in the years immediately following the regime, many of the skeletal remains scattered across the surface of the fields and forests were collected, and some mass graves excavated. Once amassed, the skeletal remains (*khmouch cha'ang*; literally the bones of the dead) were housed in wooden *p'teah khmouch* – houses for the dead built under the orders of the

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<sup>80</sup> For example, no males under the age of fifty could apply to be ordained, and qualifications from outside Cambodia were not accepted as proof of Buddhist learning, thus limiting the number of people who could become monks. Ian Harris argues that these restrictions were in order to maximise production forces in post-DK Cambodia (Harris 2008: 194).



PRK. These cabin-like structures held the remains for many years, and whilst many have now been abandoned and dismantled, in some sites (such as Koh Sop), they remain as evidence of the presence of killing fields at the site.

After Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in 1989, the *p'teah khmouch* were neglected and abandoned; state officials no longer maintained them, and they held little resonance for people in the local communities. Anne Yvonne Guillou, the only anthropologist to do work focusing specifically on the dead of the Khmer Rouge, states that 'these memorials were seen as state-sponsored commemoration devices and as such [people] did not feel concerned by them' (Guillou 2012a: 12). In the areas I visited, people said it was not their business to look after them because the dead within them 'are not our dead' (this view relates nowadays to the cremation of the remains, as discussed below). The huts were neglected, and floods, animals, and time, destroyed the bones many contained. Following a coup in 1997, in which Hun Sen (the current Prime Minister) took control of Cambodia, the political importance of the remains was reinstated (see chapters five – seven), and those remaining were moved from the remote rural locations to newly built concrete stupa housed with pagoda complexes in more easily accessible areas, often geographically close or politically affiliated to a district office.<sup>81</sup>

One of the concerns of the dead is the treatment of their remains, and this often relates to the loneliness they feel when they are not embraced within the family or pagoda complex. Although state-led formal rituals were not conducted, and

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<sup>81</sup> The remains were often collated from *p'teah khmouch* in several different areas, although occasionally so many remains existed that several pagodas could collect remains. In Koh Sop, the remains were split between three pagodas, although the pagoda where district events are held received the majority of the bones.

even local, informal ones were rare, collecting the dead and storing them together enabled them to be cared for, and to be removed from the loneliness and suffering that those left in the wild endured.

In the literature on Cambodia much is made of the distinction between the forest [*prei*] and the town [*srok*] as symbols of two different perceptions of moral order (Davis 2008; Lim 2013; Zucker 2013). Before I left for the field I was highly dubious that this dichotomy was so apparent: it seemed too structured, too neat, too dichotomous. Even after I had been in the country for some time, it seemed an exaggeration. However, when people started to talk to me about the dead from the Khmer Rouge, they did indeed use these locations to symbolise control and order for them. 'After the Khmer Rouge,' Yay told me, 'lots of them [the dead] were lost in the forest.'

While *srok* represents domestic, controlled, and civil, the forest represents wildness, destruction and disorder. It is 'all that is chaotic, barbarian, untamed and lawless' (Zucker 2013: 114). The forest is used to describe things outside proper control and social order - the Khmer Rouge, for example, who lived and fought 'in the forest.'<sup>82</sup> In addition the forest is the place for the dead, particularly those who had unhappy deaths, or did not receive appropriate care. The forest is frightening for the living because of its wildness, and because of this areas of land that had been killing fields, and therefore held many ghosts were called *Prei khmouch* (forest of the dead, or forest of ghosts) by some of my informants.

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<sup>82</sup> This was a euphemism many cadre used when I first knew them to indicate their membership with the party.

For the dead, therefore, who were lost in the forest, life was frightening, and lonely, my informants told me. Being collected and contained within *p'teah khmouch* provided a way of bringing the dead in from the wild and back into the embrace of the state. This relates even to their display in stupa in tourist sites. Yay yay told me that being somewhere with so many people alleviates their loneliness, and brings them back into social life:

[being on display] doesn't bother them. There should be people around to calm them down rather than leaving them in the forest.... it helps a little bit to have people around, have electricity, and be crowded. It is like reducing 10% of their loneliness.

Although most of my informants acknowledged the political motivations behind the movement of the remains in the 1990s, they considered the newly built stupa to be appropriate places for the dead. When they were in wooden *p'teah khmouch* cows and other animals scavenged the bones and weather degraded them. Om Ta, a caretaker who works at Choeung Ek felt that the concrete stupa is a much better place for the dead:

It's better than before when we only had a wooden building. Now we have a proper place with shelves to store them on, and we clean the skeletons from time to time. Before we only had a wooden building like an old school building and they were piled up on top of each other. Some of them fell down, and the dogs would chew and carry the bones around. Now we have a better place to store them, which really shows respect to the dead.

In addition to being preferable to the frangible wooden structures, the concrete stupa also replicate the *cheddei* that most remains are kept in following

cremation. *Cheddei* are stupa built specifically to house the cremains of the dead. Mostly built by family members, they are usually constructed within pagoda complexes (because it is the monks who best control the dead (Davis 2009)), however, some people have them built at home. Whilst in an ideal scenario the remains of each individual has their own *cheddei*, this is only a reality for wealthier Khmer. For many, the cost of the funeral itself is crippling, and the building of a *cheddei* (which can cost several thousand dollars) beyond their means. Because of this, many pagodas have a communal stupa<sup>83</sup> for the remains of the poor. In several pagodas I visited this communal stupa also houses the remains of those killed under the Khmer Rouge thus caring for all of those whose families cannot (see figure six).



Figure six: Khmer Rouge remains and urns of the poor at two different pagoda (source: the author)

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<sup>83</sup> Communal stupa are often paid for by wealthy people as a means of gaining merit to accumulate karma.

As a monk I spent several hours interviewing on Buddhist practices and teachings explained to me, even when used as tourist attractions, such as at Choeung Ek, stupa provide appropriate storage for the dead:

You can say that bones are displayed [in these stupa]. However, bones are kept in urns so that family can look after their parents or relative's bone. Some bones are put in the urn and kept in the pagoda and some bones are put in the urn and kept in a stupa in front of people's homes. These bones are kept at Choeung Ek because they do not have any relatives, so they put them all at one place so that other people who could not find their relatives will celebrate *bangskol* and pass the merit to those dead people.

His statement highlights another important aspect of the care of the Khmer Rouge dead; that they are kept in communal stupa because they 'do not have relatives.' By this he does not mean that literally no kin remains (although this is the case for some), but that it is impossible to distinguish one set of remains from another and that it cannot be ascertained for certain whose relatives each set of remains is. It is therefore preferable that they remain in one location where anyone who wants to visit can access them, than be distributed incorrectly.

This also relates to cremation of the remains. Although cremation is the most common mode of corpse disposal in Cambodia, it is not the only means, and it is deemed unnecessary (and even detrimental) for the remains of the Khmer Rouge dead. Firstly, the dead whose bones they are have already been reincarnated into their next life (see chapter four). As such although material remnants of the person, skeletal remains are no longer connected to them; 'those who died can be compared to a piece of wood, which is worthless,' Srey Srey told me. Their use by

the government as material symbols of the regime is therefore acceptable, even to those who consider their relatives to be amongst those displayed (see chapter six). Secondly, cremation is a ritually controlled act arranged by relatives of those who have died. One of its purposes is to reduce the body to a state in which it can be collected and stored by the living (either at home or at a pagoda); ‘we cremate our parents so that we can pick up some bones and keep them,’ the monk explained.<sup>84</sup> This is both a marker of respect to the dead, but also holds some purpose: once cremated the remains are considered to hold some aspect of power that enables protection to be given to living kin (provided the dead are respected with offerings on ritual occasions). As the monk told me, the bones left by the Khmer Rouge ‘have no relatives’; they are muddled, and while this does not cause distress to either the living or the dead, it does mean that cremation is as impossible as it is unnecessary; ‘We don’t know them. We don’t know whose uncles, aunties, or relatives these are,’ Om Yay said when I asked about it. Yay Da, who was with us as we were conversing, elaborated:

When we see the bones we don’t know which bones are my relatives and which ones are not.... They didn’t burn the bones because normally when we cremate the bones there has to be a family member to represent each family and take the ash to put in an urn for respect. However, in this case we don’t know which bones belong to whom.

To cremate the remains, therefore, would not only be unnecessary (because the dead have been reincarnated and their bones are like wood), but also impossible because nobody knows which remains belong to whom. This relates to the earlier

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<sup>84</sup> Following King Father Sihanouk’s cremation in February 2013, the current King (Norodom Sihamoni) and his mother sifted through the cremains to remove pieces of bone: this was broadcast across all TV stations, as the funeral was the only thing being shown on Khmer television that evening.

point made that the dead are 'not our dead.' Not only do they hold no ritual responsibility for them, but neither can they assume this responsibility; it is seen as a state issue, and therefore considered better that the government takes care of them in the communal stupas, where at least twice annually (at *Pchum Benh* and New Year) they receive visitors and offerings and have merit passed to them.

### **Annual ritual care**

Of particular importance in the care of those killed under the Khmer Rouge are *Pchum Benh* - the annual festival for the dead, Khmer New Year, and for Chinese-Khmer, the grave-sweeping festival of *Cheng Meng*. Whilst corporeal remains soon became powerless and relatively unimportant to most people, the spirits of those who died needed careful care and consideration. The most important aspect in the care of those killed under the Khmer Rouge is the passing of merit from the living to the dead. This enables the dead to accumulate karma, which will help their next reincarnation. *Pchum Benh*, New Year and *Cheng Meng* all enable merit to be sent to the dead collectively, and because they adequately care for the dead, there is no need for individual funerals, specialist ceremonies, or other specific actions related to those killed under the regime.

*Pchum Benh*, a fifteen day ritual held annually in September or October (according to the lunar calendar), enables people to make offerings to seven generations of dead kin to lessen their (the dead's) suffering. James Clifford Holt argues that *Pchum Benh* is the most important and popular ritual in contemporary Cambodia; it is, he writes, 'a major celebration of the family on a national scale, and something of a celebration of the nation on a family scale' (Holt 2012: 12). It is because of the turbulent decades of conflict and unrest, he argues, that this ritual

has become so important.<sup>85</sup> *Pchum Benh* is a collective ritual directed to any whose death was 'undesirable' (i.e. who did not have a peaceful death either physically or morally); as such, it includes allowances for those who died during Democratic Kampuchea.



Figure seven: depiction of *Pchum Benh* at Wat Kampong Tralach (source: the author)

During the fifteen days, *preta* (hungry ghosts – those who have died in violent and unpredicted manners), who have been trapped in *tanarout* – the Khmer underworld - are freed, and return to earth to feed.<sup>86</sup> People visit seven pagodas

<sup>85</sup> A more cynical person might argue that in contemporary Cambodia, where 65% of the population never experienced the regime, or the decades of conflict surrounding it, its popularity derives as much from the extending national holiday that accompanies it as from its religious, familial, or national meanings. Certainly amongst many of my informants, the holiday was taken as an opportunity to rest and see family and friends, with many not even going to the pagoda once, let alone on every day of the festival, as ritually mandated.

<sup>86</sup> Bunnwath told me there are three types of *preta*: ones who can eat whatever is offered; ones who can eat, but only after monks have recited the dhamma (Buddhist teachings) for them; and ones whose karma is so bad, that even when family give offerings and food, they cannot eat.



to transfer merit to seven generations of relatives<sup>87</sup>; which helps them accumulate karma and thus speed up their reincarnation, and make the next life easier.<sup>88</sup> Merit is passed by the performance of specific chants by the monks; during *Pchum Benh* this happens early each morning. In most pagodas a longer ceremony is performed on the final day of the festival; for many of my informants this was the only day they attended pagoda.

The *Pchum Benh* ceremony replicates *bangskol* – generic rituals for the dead that can be conducted on any occasion ('the prayers are the same, it is just that one is called *Bangskol* ceremony, once is called *Pchum Benh* ceremony' a monk told me). Offerings are given to the monks, who then recite specific prayers that pass merit to the dead. As with funeral rituals, the presence of corporeal remains is not necessary, however, those whose names are called and therefore know to come to receive it more easily receive merit. This makes not having corporeal remains acceptable for the living; they know that as long as the name of your dead relatives is called, they will receive the merit you send them.

Unlike the physical remains, which no-one has responsibility for, everyone is responsible for the spirits because they interject in the lives of all living, not only their relatives. Many of those who died during the Khmer Rouge lost all their family. In contemporary Cambodia, therefore, people are acutely aware that some dead may have no-one to pass them merit. In addition, the massive displacements and ruptures of traditional living patterns, where villages more or less equated to families (Ebihara 1968), means that many people do not know for

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<sup>87</sup> Holt suggests that the seven generations derives from medieval China, where it took seven generations to be reincarnated back into the family (Holt 2012: 18).

<sup>88</sup> Reincarnation as one of the modes in which the dead have been re-incorporated into Khmer society is discussed in chapter four.

certain which of their relatives died. An important aspect of *Pchum Benh* therefore, is to send merit to all the anonymous dead. Bu Soth, who works at Choeung Ek makes sure to pass merit every year to those who died at the site:

I have some money, so I give offerings to the monks and I share that with the dead, the 8985 people who died here - both men and women, may they come to receive the merit I do (*tvea bon*).

This is not as altruistic as it may appear; as mentioned above, *Pchum Benh* is when the malevolent *preta* come to roam the earth; giving them offerings and passing them merit is not only an act of compassion, but also an act of protection for the living.

*Pchum Benh* is not the only ceremony to attend to the Khmer Rouge dead. Before Khmer New Year in April, most Khmer *tvea bon* (do good deeds / make merit - literally 'doing ceremonies') by attending a pagoda to *bangskol*. For the majority of my informants, these ceremonies were best performed at their local pagodas; because merit could reach the dead wherever they are, there is no need to visit their death site, or even the pagoda closest to it, even if they know where it is. Some pagodas open the stupa that contain the Khmer Rouge dead during these ceremonies, but most of my informants told me they did not go to see the dead; they did not need to because they had already attended to their spirits by doing *bangskol*.

Chinese-Khmer also give offerings during *Cheng Meng*<sup>89</sup>. *Cheng Meng* is the annual grave-sweeping ceremony occurring usually at the beginning of April.

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<sup>89</sup> Also spelt Qing Ming or Ching Ming.

During the festival, people visit their relatives' graves and clean and decorate them, before giving offerings of food. An important part of the ceremony is passing items of comfort to the dead – clothes, money, cars: this is usually done by burning effigies of these items, with a belief that once ritually burned these items will reach the dead in the afterlife and help them be comfortable. If they are looked after in this way, they are more likely to help and support their living relatives, for example by keeping them healthy, or helping them become successful in business. *Cheng Meng* also provides an opportunity for people to care for those they lost during Democratic Kampuchea – in some areas small ceremonies are held at the pagodas containing remains of the Khmer Rouge dead; their stupas are cleaned and decorated with brightly coloured paper (see figure eight), offerings made, effigies burned, and feasts held.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the treatment during *Bangskol*, which provides helps the dead with their next life, *Cheng Meng* provides comfort to the living in this life – passing these items to the dead provides them comfort, encouraging them to help the living; providing wealth and good health.

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<sup>90</sup> Several years ago the âchar at the pagoda where many of the remains from Koh Sop are kept, installed a kiln for burning such effigies in the stupa containing the dead, because many of the local Chinese-Khmer community believe that most of the people killed on Koh Sop were Chinese.



Figure eight: Po Tonle stupa with remnants of *Cheng Meng* decorations (source: the author)

All of these factors enable those killed under the Khmer Rouge to be embraced within the system whether or not traditional ceremonies and rituals were practiced during the regime. This is only possible because of the flexibility and resilience of Khmer Buddhism and animism, which enabled them to persist despite efforts to destroy them, and to resurface after the regime, with provision made to deal with the ruptures and chaos caused by the regime.

### **Ritual resilience**

Some scholars have suggested that the Khmer Rouge destroyed the Cambodian ritual system (LeVine 2010; Ovensen, Trankell and Ojendal 1996). In her exploration of birth and wedding sites of Democratic Kampuchea, LeVine (2010: 14) declared that the Khmer Rouge performed *Ritualcide*, and by doing so 'generated a cosmic

betrayal.’ However, the attempts at *ritualcide* were unsuccessful. Most religious and spiritual systems are adaptable, and people are usually pragmatic about these systems, adapting them to suit individual needs and lifestyles (Kawano 2004). Ignoring this adaptability is a major flaw in much of the anthropological literature on post-DK Cambodia, which either insists on virtually identical rituals pre and post Democratic Kampuchea, arguing that Cambodians simply ‘layer over’ the past in the present (for example: Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Ebihara 2002), or goes to the opposite extreme of positing a complete destruction of traditional rituals (for example LeVine 2010; Ovensen, Trankell and Ojendal 1996). In this scenario alterations made are implied to be simple compromises or destructions. This is a particularly devastating view of Cambodian Buddhism, and one not reflected in practice.

Whilst destruction of religion was the intention, and social control over the population meant rituals could not occur (LeVine 2010; Ngor 2003), even during the regime some people found ways of adapting customs to their circumstances, for example by uttering their own blessings to the dead, hiding food to give offerings for those departed, sneaking away at night to bury people, and burying people under particularly spiritual aspects of the landscape, such as tamarind trees (which are a favoured housing of the *Neak Ta*).<sup>91</sup> For many, simply being able to bury their relatives themselves was seen as fortunate, as Lök Chan, who lost most members of his family, told me:

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<sup>91</sup> LeVine (2010) provides a good overview and analysis of these adaptations in her book *Love and Dread in Cambodia: Weddings, Births and Ritual Harm under the Khmer Rouge*.

In the Pol Pot era, we didn't talk about ceremonies or anything else; if we got to bury [the dead] ourselves it was lucky enough... We got to bury [my brother] with our own hands. I was the one who dug the soil.

In addition, many of the concepts of Buddhism existed throughout the regime, and modes of 'thinking, feeling, speaking, moving,' that were learned as children and 'embodied as habitus' (Ledgerwood 2008: 148) continued to be important despite (or perhaps because of) attempts to destroy them. Reincarnation and karma are two of these, and will be discussed in chapter four.

The pre-existing Buddhist/animist framework of pre-Democratic Kampuchea remained, in modified form, throughout the regime, and resurged following its fall. Most dead, therefore were encompassed within the social structure shortly after its demise. That is not to say that people did not grieve, nor that the mass death that occurred during the regime was not emotionally devastating. It was. A few of my informants tried to locate their dead relatives, but with so many dead scattered across the country it was almost impossible. Most never attempted to look because of this and instead cared for them through Buddhist annual ceremonies, even in the very early years. Thus the issue of reburial or cremation and the inability to conduct 'proper' funeral rites did not have the devastating effect it has in other locations, such as Vietnam. The fluidity of Khmer Buddhism offers resilience to devastation:

Khmer culture, then, may not be characterised so much by weakness and fragmentation but by a surprisingly resilient social fluidity – a fluidity that has long been held together by the unifying and structuring force of Khmer Buddhism. Despite all the trauma and upheavals of war and the lack of tight

corporate social structures, many Cambodians today seem still to nurture a strong sense of their common heritage and destiny (Kent 2003: 10)

After the demise of Democratic Kampuchea, Cambodia has seen a resurgence and regeneration of Buddhist and animist practices, both among local people and through government initiatives. One of the first things people attended to after the regime was the *Neak Ta*. Their care was salient, and more important than any other aspect of spiritual care, including the care for the thousands of dead who initially haunted the land. Ming Yay who returned to her homeland under the veil of Vietnamese bombing in 1979 told me that although they invited monks to pray for the dead, they first celebrated a ceremony for the *Neak Ta*, because it is the *Neak Ta* that ensures health and well being in their locality:

We swore that whenever we could return to the village, we would do a ceremony to the spirits of the host who protects the land [the *Neak Ta*]

Although formal rituals took some time to be re-established, over the years almost all of the rituals that had been banned were re-instated (Zucker 2006; LeVine 2010; Ledgerwood 2008; Davis 2009; Rithy Men 2002), and Buddhism in particular is being re-imagined and re-invented in relation to contemporary issues and political needs (Kent 2003; Ledgerwood 2008; Zucker 2006, 2013). Its regeneration offers a continuance between the past – the era before the conflicts (particularly the Khmer Rouge, who were known as *Neak Kmean Sasanea* – the people of no religion) - and now. As Ming Yay told me, ‘this is our religion. Then [during Khmer Rouge] they had no religion’<sup>92</sup>. Reinstating these rituals brought

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<sup>92</sup> When I first arrived in Cambodia many people presumed I was Christian. In answer to questions about religion, I would tell people I had no religion. After a few weeks my research assistant took me aside and advised that perhaps I should not tell people this; many Cambodians associate

security and stability to many people. Guillou (2012: 17) wrote that the re-establishment of *Pchum Benh* in the 1990s helped comfort the living because it provided an opportunity for collective care for the dead both known and unknown:

I myself witnessed a huge relief among the population in the days following the first festival, as if the atmosphere was suddenly lighter and quieter.

## Conclusion

It has become a common trope amongst western observers that displaying the remains of the dead and not cremating them is highly disrespectful to Khmer Buddhists (Hughes 2005; Jarvis 2013; Becker 2013: 107).<sup>93</sup> These statements object to the use of skeletal remains to reify political narratives of the regime and its liberation (see chapters five – seven), and to the lack of appropriate ritual they assume to have been conducted for the dead. This chapter has shown, however, that this is not the case. Care for the physical remains of those killed during the regime is appropriately devolved to the pagodas in which they remain, and care for the spirits is encompassed in the annual ritual cycles. The most important aspect of this is the passing of merit to the dead. In Cambodia, no matter where you are, the merit will reach those dead people. In Buddhism, with bones or without bones, near or far, the merit can always be passed to your relatives.

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having no religion with the Khmer Rouge, she told me, and she did not think it was doing me any favours in building relationships.

<sup>93</sup> It has also become a site of political contestation between the late King Father Norodom Sihanouk, and Prime Minister Hun Sen, as will be discussed in chapter five.



The Khmer Rouge dead in contemporary Cambodia are encompassed within the annual ritual cycle, and individual ceremonies solely for the dead of the Khmer Rouge was largely unnecessary either then or now. There are a multitude of ways, both public and private, by which the dead are reintegrated into social life, many of which rely on connections and continuance as ways of dealing with disruption. This is particularly salient in such contexts as war, conflict, famine, and other causes of mass death. They provide continuance and assurance that these periods (and their impacts) are both temporary and, like the cycle of death and rebirth within which most Khmer live, inescapable. The next chapter will show how relationships with the dead changed over time to enable them to be incorporated into these acceptable aspects of social life, while chapter five will explore the ways in which karma and reincarnation provide a means of reincorporating the dead into the lives of the living, and continuing a functioning social system despite the mass ruptures of the Khmer Rouge regime.

### **Chapter three: Helpful dead, frightening ghosts - relationships between the living and the dead**

Those young Khmer should thank the spirits. They are receiving benefits  
from their death.

*- Srey Srey, on the benevolence of those killed by the Khmer Rouge*

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The dead roamed Cambodia in the years immediately after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, haunting people in their attempts to alleviate their loneliness and re-connect with the living. At Choeung Ek, they wreaked havoc. They stopped people sheltering at the site and kept others awake with their crying. A child was killed when a ghost spooked the ox pulling the cart he was in, causing it to topple and run over him. But in the early 1980s, the ghosts stopped haunting and the area became safe for the people in and around it. The dead began to help the country to regain peace, and over time most were reborn.

In Koh Sop a similar scenario ensued. Immediately after liberation people across the river saw lights moving across the space and then disappearing – a sure sign of ghosts. Those moving to the site were haunted. The ghosts tried to trick them; disguising themselves as shadows or people they knew, only to disappear when they turned around. The dead permeated the earth: fruit grown on the island was full of blood; fish and crabs, gorging on the corpses, full of fat. As time moved on,

however, and more people moved to the island, the ghosts stopped haunting. People began to connect with the dead, who helped the living restart their lives. Over time the dead lost their power, and nowadays, the ghosts from those killed under the Khmer Rouge have all but disappeared.

Ghosts and spirits are not imaginary beings in Cambodia. They are social entities, inhabiting the world alongside living people and interacting in ways that shape social action and relationships to the past. Like the living, the dead are subject to change and transition depending on the social circumstances they encounter. This chapter examines interactions between the living and the dead of Democratic Kampuchea. Following Heonik Kwon's (2006, 2008) thesis that ghosts can be central to understanding the social identity and experiences of the living, particularly the way that the social lives of the dead mirror the political lives of the living, this chapter explores the changing status of the dead from Democratic Kampuchea, examining their change from frightened and frightening entities of haunting, to benevolent allies in the reconstruction of post-DK Cambodia, to powerless beings who have since died or left their space.

To do this, it will first examine the theoretical framework of the chapter, before introducing more fully the dead and their various incarnations as well as the relevant literature from Cambodia. Two ethnographic examples of this transformation will be presented: the first from Koh Sop, the second from Choeung Ek. These two encounters will illustrate how, while the dead underwent similar patterns of transformation in demeanour and status, their support and interactions are locally situated; at Koh Sop they are local and individual; at Choeung Ek national and collective.

Whilst this chapter focuses largely on ghosts, there is an element of slippage in everyday language related to the dead in Cambodia, and therefore, I will use the 'the dead' to describe the spiritual incarnations of those killed during Democratic Kampuchea in general, using only their specific form only when it was made explicit by my informants.

## **Theoretical background**

The concepts of ghosts and haunting are common tropes in the post-conflict literature. As Heonik Kwon points out in *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (2008), both provide useful historical metaphor, particularly for events contemporaneously deemed as negative. As such they are used as rhetorical devices to explore how contemporary history is influenced by the past (the ghost of the cold war that haunts the West for example). However, as Kwon points out, the position of ghosts as valid and vital social beings has been largely ignored, and, because of their assumed position between the realms of the living and the dead with (according to early social theorists such as Durkheim) no clearly defined social functions, they have sat outside much social theory (Kwon 2008b: 23). Kwon questions this exclusion by using Simmel's model of the stranger to show how ghosts in Vietnam are an integral element in the construction of social identity; by their very exclusion, they are aspects of what forms identities and relationships with other beings, particularly the widely regarded ancestral entities:

The society of ancestors, as with other more secular societies, has foreign relations as well as domestic politics. We may not ignore these external relations in painting a social order... the negative cult of ghosts is mutually constitutive of the positive cult of ancestors and we cannot imagine the symbolic realm of

ancestors without placing them in a wider relational structure with those of ghosts' (ibid.).

In this chapter I follow Kwon's example, examining the dead as vital beings who live alongside the living, and who affect social life beyond being simply remnants of memory or imprints of the past. In Cambodia, as in Vietnam, the dead are socially active beings, who interact with the living on a regular basis. As such they must be examined not as metaphor or allegory, but as socially salient beings. I particularly draw on Kwon's assertion that the social lives of ghosts reflect the political lives of the living (Kwon 2006: 178). I do not mean to diminish them to simply allegory or metaphor, but in sharing social worlds, the dead experience the same disjunctures and chaos that the living do and therefore their experiences and status parallel those of the living. Because of this, their experiences can help make visible the status of the living, because it so closely resembles their own.

Other than Kwon's work, where ghosts and other spirits resulting from violence appear in the anthropological literature they are often distinguished from other, more 'positive' spiritual manifestations (such as ancestors and guardian spirits), instead appearing as signs of suffering and / or social marginalization made material through spirit interactions: possessions, hauntings, and other, usually malevolent, encounters. This is particularly the case in places where historical violence has caused an excess of spiritual beings. Sasanka Perera (2001), for example, argues that during the intensification of political violence following the Janata Vimukti Peramuna-lead violent insurrection and state led counter insurgency in Sri Lanka (1988 to 1991), possession by wandering spirits became a mode of dealing with the terror caused by enforced disappearances, tortures and killings. Possessions, and other spirit interactions enabled people to give symbolic

meaning to the events and so provided a means of coping with fear as well as remembering the past. The sustained political violence in Sri Lanka had eroded trust in secular systems of coping and healing and new modes therefore developed from within already existing, easily accessible aspects of the social sphere (i.e. ghosts and spirits), that enabled people to deal with the past without guilt or further suffering.<sup>94</sup>

Judith Bovensiepen (2009), meanwhile, explains how the landscape of Timor Leste became more dangerous for people returning to their homes after the military invasions and forced resettlements of the 1970s and 1980s, because an excess of spirits of those killed but not properly buried saturated the landscape. This saturation caused a rise in the number of land spirits and an increase of *lulik* - a spiritual potency that inhabits the land - making it dangerous for those returning to the area. In order to regain safe relationships with the land, those returning had to re-establish reciprocal relationships with the spiritual realm, however, its potency remained high throughout her fieldwork; a physical and metaphysical reminder of the disjunctures in social life brought about by the conflicts.

Most of the literature on the dead in Cambodia examines the rituals that encompass them, rather than the dead themselves (for example Davis 2009; Ledgerwood 2008; O'Lemmon 2014; Zucker 2006). A few exceptions exist. The most authoritative voice on Khmer spirits is Cambodian anthropologist Ang

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<sup>94</sup> Unlike Perera's findings in Sri Lanka, justice and revenge are not central characteristics of encounters with the dead from the Khmer Rouge, although stories in folklore follow this theme, and recent events, such as mass fainting of factory workers, indicate a form of resistance played out through possession (Wallace 2014). One similarity between the two countries, however, is in the decline of trust in secular justice systems following ongoing political violence, which could be indicated in Cambodia by the rise in people visiting spirit mediums to ask for guidance from the *Neak Ta* post-Democratic Kampuchea (O'Lemmon 2014).

Chouléan, whose doctoral thesis *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmère* (1986) outlined the different spirits to be found across the country. This work focused primarily on classifying spirits; individual spirits are missing from the analysis, as they are from his subsequent work, which, although often concerning spirits, focuses largely on myth, ritual and the over-arching relationships between animism and Buddhism in Cambodia (Chouléan 1986, 1988, 1990, 2004). Didier Bertrand spent several years collecting data on the *boramey* – the spirits that possess spirit mediums across Cambodia, but like Chouléan, he concentrated on classifying types of *boramey* rather than presenting individual encounters with specific dead (Bertrand 2001). In his thesis on death rituals in contemporary Cambodia, Erik Davis (2009) paid attention to *preta* (hungry ghosts), humans reborn into *tanarout* – the Khmer underworld, usually because of sins conducted throughout their lives. *Preta* not only represent a literal incarnation, but is also used in contemporary Cambodia as a mode of deriding the social contradictions and disruption to family and village life that migrant work causes.<sup>95</sup>

One illuminating work regarding interactions with the dead is *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning of Southeast Asians in Exile* by Jean Langford (2013). Based on conversation with Khmer and Laos emigrants to the US, Langford uses their stories of ghosts, haunting, and care for the dead, to examine biopolitics in the West and question assumptions and ethics within medicine in the US, particularly examining the conflicts that arise in interactions with state agencies. Whilst there are some issues with this book (for example she

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<sup>95</sup> The other place ghosts and spirits occur is in the psychological literature, in articles examining the ongoing suffering of Khmer survivors and refugees of the Khmer Rouge, primarily in France and the US (Becker 2000, Rechtman 2000, 2006). These papers, however, tend to dismiss the spirits (who often visit their relatives in dreams), classifying them as psychological imprints of ongoing suffering rather than viable beings with whom the living need to interact.

intentionally blurs the boundaries between Cambodia and Laos, suggesting Southeast Asia to be a homogenous territory where experience, relationships and interactions are synonymous in each location), I like this book because of its engagement with recent events in the narrators' lives, beyond the wars and conflicts, and its understanding of the vital role the dead play in these interactions. It therefore enables the reader to comprehend that war and conflict are not the only events affecting people from these countries, preventing stagnation of these events in people's life stories.

Some of the only work that focuses specifically on the dead from the Khmer Rouge is that of French anthropologist Anne Yvonne Guillou (2012; 2013), who engages with Alain Forest's (2000), authoritative book on *Neak Ta* (the local guardian spirits), by examining how the dead in her fieldsite in Pursat province are taking on characteristics of *Neak Ta* by providing protection and moral ordering to the living. Through the circulation of *pāramī*, (a kind of circulating spiritual power) the dead of the Khmer Rouge imbue some kind of power to the mass graves that they inhabit, and like *Neak Ta* are 'touchy' and 'ill tempered' and demand respectful behavior of those who pass through their space (Guillou 2012b: 221).<sup>96</sup> Guillou's article is illuminating, particularly in its analysis of the biopolitics of the UN-backed Khmer Rouge trial (which she convincingly argues, bears little resonance to most Khmer people, and is instead entirely nationally and internationally focused), however, while I agree with Guillou's assertion that some of the characteristics of the dead from Democratic Kampuchea seemed *Neak Ta* like in their abilities to make people sick, and people used the modes of talking

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<sup>96</sup> This is happening most controversially to the spirit of Pol Pot, who is transforming into a powerful guardian spirit in the village of Choam, in Anlong Veng province, where his remains are buried.



about the *khmouch* to be similar to the way they would about the *Neak Ta* (i.e. testy and grumpy), I think there is a conflation here between language and characteristics that my research does not support. At the sites I visited the *khmouch* from the Khmer Rouge did at first make people sick, and disturbed many through their haunting. However, my informants told me this was because they themselves were frightened and confused and did not want to be disturbed. *Neak Ta*, on the other hand, are not confused – they make people sick because they own the land and the water, and people have disrespected this. They punish people and therefore order behaviour, whereas the DK dead simply wanted to be left alone. Besides this in most places I visited there are no haunting ghosts or spirits from the dead of the Khmer Rouge. Guillou herself comments that ghosts or other spiritual incarnations of those killed under the Khmer Rouge are almost non-existent; most have left the graves and these spaces have become benign, and where ghosts haunt, they are *khmouch* from recent deaths. The dead of the Khmer Rouge have now been reborn, and as such all that remains are their skeletons, which are ‘like wood.’

The characteristics of the dead killed by the Khmer Rouge have changed alongside the country. They do not function as a means of suppressed voices being heard, but parallel the living in their affects and status. This is not surprising. Spirits belong to the accepted realms of existence that beings can be reborn into and many of these realms of existence share the world with humans. That the dead parallel the emotions of the living does not make them metaphorical depictions (although sometimes they are used in this way, reflecting their liminality); they are subject to the same disjunctures, chaos and disorder as the living because

they exist alongside them and are emotional and vital entities who need care and attention.

## **Ghosts and spirits in Cambodia**

Encounters with the dead are commonplace in Cambodia, and it is home to a plethora of ghosts and spirits, all of which are socially active entities - most spirits interact with, and make demands of, humans and animals as part of everyday life<sup>97</sup>. Much of the annual ritual cycle is structured around rituals providing communication and conciliation to various spirits (LeVine 2010; Nou 2012), and their importance in the lives of the living is highlighted in the plethora of folktales and fables that centre on the spirits of the dead, and the number of myths circulated across Cambodia in which the *Neak Ta* (the local guardian spirits) are fundamental.

Like the living, the dead are organized into hierarchies of power and belonging, at the top of which are the *boramey*: powerful spirits usually associated with mythical and historical beings who possess spirit mediums and give them access to knowledge (Bertrand 2001)<sup>98</sup>. Most influential in my informants' everyday lives, however, are the local guardian spirits: the *Neak Ta* (translating literally as 'male old person', or colloquially 'Grandfather person'). Residing in significant features of the landscape such as particular trees or rocks, and, more recently

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<sup>97</sup> So common to everyday life are the dead that an English conversation book I bought shortly after arriving in Cambodia, had an entire section on ghosts and how to converse about them, including questions such as 'Have you ever met a ghost?' 'Have you ever been haunted by a ghost?' 'Where does the ghost live?'

<sup>98</sup> Didier Bertrand, who conducted research with spirit mediums (*Kru*) across Cambodia for several years in the late 1990s, was told that over 10,000 *boramey* exist, however, in his years of research he collected the names of only 300 (Bertrand 2001).

architectural landmarks of cities and towns (see figure nine), they own and govern the landscape of Cambodia. By engaging in reciprocal relations with the humans inhabiting or using their space, they demand respect for their property and, in return, offer protection and good fortune for those who provide for them. Failure to give respect (by asking permission to use the land and giving offerings) can be harmful - misfortune, illness and even death are used to punish those proving disrespectful<sup>99</sup>.



Figure nine: *Neak Ta* on the main road into Battambang

In addition to the *Neak Ta* and the *boramey*, both of which help order Khmer life by providing moral and spiritual guidance to people in their everyday actions and interactions, other types of the dead interact with the living. Ancestors (*kru ba cheay*) may appear in the guise of a buffalo or a cow to remind their relatives to continue respecting them. Malevolent spirits such as *Preay* or *brāy* and *arak* (the

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<sup>99</sup> In 2013 the former village chief of Koh Sop was killed by one of the island's *Neak Ta* (addressed as *Lōk Ta*) because he cut down a large and ancient quinine tree without permission.

spirits of those who have died violent deaths)<sup>100</sup> and *bai-sach* (cruel spirits from ancient times)<sup>101</sup> wreak havoc upon the humans that encounter them, causing illness or even death. *Preta* (hungry ghosts; those who have died violent deaths, or whose karma from previous misdeeds leads them to be reborn into *tanarout* – the Khmer underworld) need feeding, especially at *Pchum Benh*, otherwise they will become mischievous, and if they are hungry will visit people in their dreams to demand food. There exist others, and readers are directed to Ang Chouléan’s work for a comprehensive list.<sup>102</sup>

However, the category I am most interested in for this chapter are *khmouch*. *Khmouch* are the ghosts of the recently deceased and therefore all people become *khmouch*. Academically a difference exists between ghosts (*khmouch*) – remnants of those who have recently died - and spirits (*vi nhean khan*) – beings that haunt - however, there is slippage in everyday parlance between different beings, and they are not easily extracted from each other. *Vi nhean khan* was never used by my informants, whilst *khmouch* was used to refer to ghosts, spirits that haunt (*khmouch loun*), and various other incarnations of the dead that interact with the living. The word *khmouch* is itself somewhat ambiguous – it can

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<sup>100</sup> These are usually female spirits. *Arak* (the malevolent spirits of women who have died violent deaths, usually as a result of childbirth) are particularly troublesome. Although they can be calmed, they never become benevolent and are liable to become malicious again without warning.

<sup>101</sup> *Bai-sach* are the only Khmer entities that cannot be reborn: evolving from ancient times, they are full of evil and want to kill each other and humans they encounter. One of the monks I interviewed told me that an ancient Khmer prophecy says that the *bai-sach* will come from the forest claiming to be *Neak Ta*, find *kru* (spirit mediums) to communicate through, and cause chaos to the country by giving bad advice. Some monks, he told me, consider this time to be now: the *bai-sach* have entered humanity and cause chaos by encouraging people to criticize the government, kill others for their own gain, grab land from others and engage in other socially unacceptable behaviour.

<sup>102</sup> Although the spirits that Chouléan describes are becoming rarer, particularly in urban areas, and spirits in contemporary Cambodia are beginning to resemble those from contemporary fiction and film more than those of Khmer folklore.

refer to a recently deceased person, corpses of the recently deceased, or a ghost. This reflects the nature of the dead in Cambodia: immediately after death they are both a corpse and a spirit - it takes up to seven days for the dead to comprehend their death and move to their next life, and to prevent haunting and confusion, the corpse is usually not disposed of until those seven days are over (with the occasional exception of contemporary violent deaths – see chapter two). There is therefore some ambiguity in people's discussions about the dead, because they can be referring to all three modes of existence contemporaneously. It is for this reason that *khmouch* are viewed as particularly powerful and / or dangerous, because they inhabit an ambiguous existence not yet settled on their final outcome.

*Khmouch* often live in the forests or in other wild, uninhabited areas (*prei*). They can be nervous of the living, however, they also crave their company, and it is this that causes them to haunt. Whilst many of the spirits haunt in specific ways (for example *aaps*<sup>103</sup> move from house to house knocking on doors and wailing), *khmouch* can change form and often do so in order to trick people into following them, or conversing with them. They may disguise themselves as someone you know, or replicate everyday practices to fool people, as Yay explained to me when I asked her whether those who died under the Khmer Rouge manifested themselves in particular ways:

*Khmouch* are the same; when they haunt, they haunt. It's just some ghosts have one way of haunting and other ghosts have other ways of haunting. During the correction era [PRK] some people had children and a lot of people were weaving, so when they haunted us they made the sound of weaving - they hit the loom. At

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<sup>103</sup> Beings who detach their head and intestines from their bodies at night and go haunting.

that time people had kids, so when some haunted us they also made a sound like they were singing a lullaby.

In the period after their deaths *khmouch* may visit people in their dreams to place demands on that person or community (usually asking for certain offerings, or for particular treatment of their remains). Although they haunt and can make people sick, they are usually not malevolent, and as will be illustrated in this chapter, the haunting is often a result of their own confused emotional state.

The dead of the Khmer Rouge were usually referred to by my informants as *khmouch*, although distinctions were made between those who have died recently, and those who died during Democratic Kampuchea, who have mostly been reincarnated and whose remains therefore are only skeletal. As previously mentioned, although in the years immediately after the regime, they saturated the landscape, physically and spiritually, haunting those who came to live where they did, nowadays almost no ghosts remain from the Khmer Rouge regime, at least not in any of the sites I conducted research in. And in each area the dead had undergone similar changes: from frightened and frightening entities that haunted, to benevolent dead helping the living, to powerless spirits waiting to be reborn, to reincarnated beings now inhabiting Cambodia.

### **Ethnographic case studies**

Having covered the relevant literature and explained the place of *khmouch*, I will now present ethnographic case studies that highlight the way relationships between the dead and the living have evolved in the years after Democratic Kampuchea, from haunting ghosts, to benevolent dead, who have subsequently

been reborn. The following ethnographic encounters show how the interactions and dispositions of the dead, whilst following the same overall pattern, are locally specific, and related to the site they inhabit. The two ethnographies are compiled from narratives told over several months – from Om Yay; Om Srey; Ming Yay; Yay; Srey Sabbay; and her husband Bu at Koh Sop, and Srey Chan and her husband Samnang, Om Ta, Bong Broh, Bu Soth, and Bong La at Choeung Ek.

### **Rebuilding lives: the dead at Koh Sop**

When Srey Sabbay and Bu arrived on Koh Sop in the early 1980s, bodies still covered much of the land and lay rotting in the lakes and streams: they had to clear them from the land to build their houses, sometimes burning them, but usually just piling them with the others under the quinine tree. Some people did not bother to clear them, they simply piled soil on top of them and built on top. In describing the bodies she said ‘they looked like fermented fish.’ Om Yay told me that they smelled ‘*ma hes*,’ a Khmer term that describes a damp, mouldy kind of smell of something not properly dried, like a wet towel. Om Srey described the smell as ‘sticky’<sup>104</sup> - to get rid of the smell from their skin, people washed their hands with ripe guava or, if they could get it, pineapple. They squashed the fruit over their hands and the acid from the fruit cut through the smell and prevented it from sticking.

Encounters with the dead, both physical and spiritual, were inevitable at this time. It was a frightening place to those living nearby. ‘When I first came’ Srey Sabbay told me, ‘people did not dare to come here. They asked me if I was scared living

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<sup>104</sup> I recognise this description from my own experience of working with corpses – there is something about the smell that seems to stick in your nose, on your clothes, in your hair, and stays with you long after dealing with death.

here. People on the other side [of the river] saw lights flying about – like *far*.’ *Far* are lights that move across the space, fading as they travel. They are a certain indicator of the presence of ghosts. At first the dead had haunted people, causing insecurity and fear for some villagers. Om Srey had never been haunted, but Om Yay told me how the ghosts caused trouble in the early days to her and others in the village, recounting an incident one afternoon when she was transplanting young rice from paddy to paddy:

Om Yay: At first, they caused trouble to us. They haunted us. I was unconscious from one to five pm.

Om Srey: She had the frightened feeling with her that’s why.

Om Yay: No, it wasn’t like that. In the morning, while transplanting the paddies, I found pieces of clothing in the soil. It was around 1pm when they started to affect me, and then I fainted. All my children were crying.... I felt dizzy and I saw the fan was moving fast and then I fainted. My jaw was very tight.

Om Srey: You were sick too at that time maybe; we were very tired after work.

Om Yay: No sister. I saw thousands of hands catching my legs and I couldn’t move; I felt like the *khmouch* (dead) were all over me....

Om Yay returned home and lay down, where the ghosts pressed her to the bed, causing her to fall unconscious. The *khmouch* left after a few hours, and though they have not bothered her since, others in the village had been haunted. Even after the Khmer Rouge had left, people from across the river reported seeing soldiers walking all over the island, and some nights, at around eight o’clock, the



village inhabitants would hear them dancing under the mango tree to the sound of beating drums. 'They were not scared of us' Om Srey reported.

Yay was also haunted. She arrived on the island in the early 1980s, when the land was still covered in forest and few people lived there. She caught glimpses of people walking around, or saw shadows in the corner of her eye, but when she looked they disappeared. On one occasion she heard the sound of someone jumping into a pond near to her house, but when she checked the pond was still. The land was still wild when she first came: the clearance of people before and during Democratic Kampuchea had allowed much of it to become overgrown, and the bamboo forest that covered the head of the island had run rampage. During the regime this had proved convenient: some executions occurred in the cover of the bamboo, although others were killed wherever they stood and left rotting across the surface of the land. When she told her husband about the haunting, he told her not to be so scared; ghosts would only haunt those who were frightened.

I asked Om Yay and Om Srey why they thought the ghosts haunted in the early days. Om Yay considered it to be because they had lost their families:

They were roaming around because they were worried about us.... they were worried about their children, because we were very small. I don't know where they would go, but they were roaming around.

**Are they still roaming around now?**

I think they are reincarnated already, because it is almost 30 years ago already.

It was not only by haunting that the dead inhabited the landscape; they saturated the land and permeated the plants and animals that grew among them. 'The

mangoes were full of fat,’ Srey Sabbay told me. Bu (Srey Sabbay’s husband) told me that the fruit was huge, and when the stems were removed, would ooze with fat. When I asked about this they both replied it was ‘the fat of the dead people.’ It was not just the mangoes. Om Yay told me of the prin tree<sup>105</sup>: ‘when it first gave fruit, it was full of blood.’ After feasting on the flesh of the corpses, the crabs and the fish were enormous. Bu said they were covered in algae and when they took the fish or fruit to market, no one would buy them. Srey Sabbay and Bu, and other people on the island, however, ate the fruit and the fish. They had no choice – they were hungry, food was scarce, and money was tight. And ‘after a year or two, [the dead] weren’t in the fruit anymore’ Bu told me.

In their presence in the landscape, and through their haunting, the dead disturbed the living, and made it difficult for them to survive. People were afraid, they could not sleep, and some became sick. Ming Yay had to dismantle and relocate her house<sup>106</sup> because it was built on top of the graves and those in them haunted the family; sometimes at night the house would spin, and the children started sleep-walking. A Feng Shui expert came to assess the house: ‘he told me that we would not be able to live safely (*sok s’roal*<sup>107</sup>) because we lived on others,’ she said. ‘All of this land was full of *khmouch*. I was scared to walk at noon<sup>108</sup>.’

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<sup>105</sup> A type of plum.

<sup>106</sup> Houses in rural Cambodia are usually one-room wood, or wood and palm-leaf, stilted houses. They can be easily dismantled and moved as necessary.

<sup>107</sup> *Sok s’roal* can be translated as safely or peacefully, or can mean both.

<sup>108</sup> It was explained to me that noon was tense time for two reasons. Firstly, most people take a nap around this time, so the village is quiet and dangerous entities therefore more likely to come out. Secondly, ghosts can disguise themselves as people, but they do not have shadows - at noon when the sun is at its highest point and shadows are short it can be difficult to tell the living from the dead.

Those living on Koh Sop accepted the ghosts as a fact of life in the early days. Like the living they were scared and confused; most of them had been killed far away from home and had lost their families and their displacement caused them much anguish. But in order to survive and live in relative peace, those moving to the site needed to make peace with the dead and come to an arrangement: that both parties would leave the other alone to exist undisturbed. After moving her house, Ming Yay told the ghosts they would not touch them anymore, and since then, has had no trouble:

if we touch them or do any harm to them, they will harm us back. They might cause us death.... So we burnt incense sticks<sup>109</sup> and said that [we would not touch them anymore] and asked them not to make us sick. When we ask like that, they will go; they will not harm us anymore.

Om Yay's house was directly behind the *p'teah khmouch* (house of the dead, or ghost house), where, after being dug up during the looting, the decomposing remains of the dead were stored for several years. At first she had not wanted to live there, because it was so close to the bodies, however, by the time she arrived on the island no other space was available. Despite her location, however, and others seeing ghosts all around her house (in the form of lights), the dead left her alone and she had remained free from haunting, because she had made an agreement with the ghosts:

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<sup>109</sup> Incense is burnt to let the spirits know the living are calling them. One informant told me that when someone has died in an accident, a ceremony is held for the spirit of the dead. Before the ceremony is held, however, incense is lit and an offering of food is left at the site of the death. 'The incense is to let the spirit know we are calling them' she explained. 'The food is for the *Neak Ta*, so he will let the spirit be free.'

I said 'Let's be friends. I won't do any harm to you and you don't do any harm to me....' I just said it like that.... I said: 'Don't come to stay here; this place is for the living people. The living.' I said it through the wind (*ni yeay tam vea yor*)<sup>110</sup>.  
If there were any spirits they would hear what I said.

Over time, and following the agreements made between them, the living and the dead started to have a more harmonious relationship, and the dead started to help the living. As in the early stages, this phase was marked by both physical and spiritual relationships. Those living on the island used the bones to make medicine<sup>111</sup>; others took their skulls as amulets to protect their house and those within it<sup>112</sup>, and as people started to grow crops again, rather than permeating them and making them inedible, the dead fertilized the land and enabled the crops to grow.

However, it was not only by using their remains that the dead supported the living. They also helped them rebuild their lives by providing luck and material support, leading people to find gold and other valuables buried in the ground; allowing people to loot their graves and their bodies. When the bodies were uncovered, several people joined in the looting and found valuables to sell and other items to use for themselves. Bong Srey, for example, used clothing from the dead:

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<sup>110</sup> Because the dead cannot be physically present, the living speak to them through the wind (*ni yeay tam vea yor* or *ni yeay tam khyorl*).

<sup>111</sup> The skeletal remains (*cha-eng khmouch* – bones of the the dead) were used to make various medicinal remedies. Usually being burned and then ground into a powder, they were mixed with various other ingredients and then drunk as a tonic. Sometimes they were simply boiled in water and the water drunk. They were, according to Srey Sabbay, particularly good for treating high fevers and rubella in children.

<sup>112</sup> This practice was common in other areas, where the skulls were taken from some of the mass gravesites and used to provide protection to those who took them, and to deter trespassers from the land. One informant in Kep told me that they were particularly effective against the Vietnamese.

When I was young I took the clothes to make into a skirt to go to school because I didn't have any clothes to wear.

### **The clothes?**

The clothes of the dead people. I took them, washed them with washing powder and made a skirt for school. At that time I didn't have any clothes to wear because my father was poor.

She explained that the dead helped her, taking pity on her because she was poor; 'they always looked after me' she said. As well as allowing her to take their clothes, whenever food was low, the *khmouch* would help her find gold in their graves:

They knew when I didn't have anything to eat; they made me find gold. I only found a little bit of gold, seven or eight hon or one *chi*<sup>113</sup>, but I often found some.

The exchange was not altruistic. Though the dead took pity on her, and helped her out, it also benefitted them; assisting the living gave them merit, which would help them in their next rebirth (see chapter four):

When I took the clothes to wear like that, they also got merit, so they helped me.

Many people joined in the looting of the graves, but the dead never made them sick, showing, Yay explained, that they approved and wanted to help the living. Some were visited in their sleep by those in the graves leading them to gold in exchange for offerings and merit passed on at the pagoda. One morning sometime in the 80s, Yay found a gold tooth while she was tending her turmeric

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<sup>113</sup> In Cambodia gold is sold by the *chi* and *damlung*. A *damlung* is ten *chi*, and weighs 37.5g metric. One *hon* is one tenth of one *chi*.

patch. After finding it the *khmouch* whose tooth it was visited her in a dream, and told her of more fortune to be found:

Those *khmouch*... gave me a dream (*aoy yul sop*)<sup>114</sup>. That one [who visited her] was very handsome. He looked like a businessman; he came with his bodyguard to give me a dream. I felt we had a fortunate connection (*nissai*), that's why I found his tooth. I found a golden tooth. It was made of real gold. I was growing tumeric and I found a set of false teeth. When I saw them I saw something and when I asked people if it's gold, I got more than one *chi* of gold. I found the gold during the day, and that night he came in my dream because we had *nissai* with each other.

The dream was very vivid – to this day Yay can remember clearly what the *khmouch* looked like and how he showed her where the treasure was:

He was handsome and wearing proper clothes. His shirt was tucked inside his trousers. He was wearing a hat and he was holding a silver and gold walking stick. He had his bodyguard behind him; his shirt was also tucked inside his trousers, but his belly was a little bit bigger. But that man didn't have a big belly. He said he was a five-star soldier [a wartime rank above the level of General].

The soldier told Yay that he had been killed during the Khmer Rouge. On reflection, she thought she must be related to him, because although *khmouch* haunt whoever is close by, my informants told me that the dead that visit people

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<sup>114</sup> It is common for the dead to visit the living in dreams: called *aoy yul sop* – literally the dead who give dreams - they usually visit relatives or friends to make demands, which the living must act on. Their demands usually relate to their comfort, asking for food or shelter, for example. These visits are usually positive, and are viewed very differently from haunting (*loun*). Though it was rare, some dead from the Khmer Rouge contacted their relatives and asked them to collect their bones, directing them to the exact location of their grave. In most examples, however, like Yay the dead directed them towards gold or other treasure.

in their dreams are usually connected to them in some way; kin, friends, or some shared experience from a previous life. Yay remembered an uncle of her mother's who had been rich during the Lon Nol period and thought it could be him:

I think he's most likely to be my flesh and blood (*sach-chheam*) because my relatives were killed there in a pit just besides my house, but I don't know where. He looked similar to my mother. He was very big and tall. His face was similar to my mothers. And he said that we were connected by fate - that's why he gave the gold to me.

In exchange for giving her his tooth the *khmouch* made demands of Yay. He asked her to take some food to the pagoda and offer it to pass merit to him to help him be reborn. Yay did this, and for a long time she kept the tooth, only selling it when she had to pay for medical bills for her daughter many years later.

The hauntings and then help from the dead had continued for some time. Even while the dead were helping some people, others were being haunted. But over time both began to wane. It is usually only those who have recently died that visit people in their dream; only just after death are they strong enough to remain connected to the living. In addition, the dead need feeding to stay strong. Those who received help from the dead gave offerings to them and thus improved their merit helping them to be reborn quicker. Om Yay told me that the other ghosts had died: fearing their power if they remained strong, people had refused to feed them, and they had grown weak and powerless, and eventually died:

we didn't give any offerings to them. If we gave offerings to them I think the spirits would be stronger. But we didn't give any offerings to them.

With their power diminished, the ghosts had become powerless - *sap roleap* (*sap* translates literally as tasteless), the land free from haunting, and people safe and secure (*sok sabbay*). When I asked Ming Yay about it, she told me that the dead were not scared anymore:

people grew crops on them and it became a village and a hometown that's why they were not scared anymore.

Most have now died and been reborn: some as a consequence of not being fed, most simply because the time passed since the regime fell has been so long, and through reciprocal relationships with the living, they have been able to rebuild their karma and be reborn. The few spirits that remain waiting to be reborn are powerless as Yay explained:

They would not be able to harm anyone because they don't have anything [any power].

### **Rebuilding the country: the dead at Choeung Ek**

Like Koh Sop, the relationships between the living and the dead at Choeung Ek went through transformations over time, following a similar pattern to that described above, although with subtle differences. At Koh Sop the benevolence of the dead was almost entirely material support to individuals: helping people find gold; letting people unearth their remains and use whatever they found; providing a means of survival and subsistence. This kind of support occurred at Choeung Ek for some people, however, the support given by the dead here was more metaphysical and nationally faced than at Koh Sop and other sites I visited.



‘A child died because of the ghosts,’ Yay Chan told me as we sat outside her house on a hot, August afternoon. Hers is a small hut built from scavenged wood and corrugated metal, one of eleven similar huts directly behind Choeung Ek, bordering the small canal that divides one village from its neighbour. The canal is stinking with fetid rubbish and the chemicals that run off from the Phnom Penh municipal tip; too poor to live elsewhere these houses represent security to the people who live in them; the poor quality of the land means it is unlikely to be desirable for land grabbing. They lived in relative peace now, though soon after the liberation the situation had been different and the dead made life difficult. ‘I saw this a long time ago’ she said:

three people came with an ox cart to collect wood, but something happened. We didn’t know why, but the cows got very spooked. I shouted to [the driver] ‘Uncle, catch your cows!’ Then when I turned around, I saw a black shadow and its eyes were huge. I looked at it and it looked at me. I kept shouting at the uncle to catch his cows properly. Suddenly, it [the ghost] went past, and the cows abruptly started galloping, so the child died [by falling from the cart]. I got very angry with the man; I kept telling him to hold the cows properly, but he didn’t listen.

Her husband elaborated:

In the cart, there was only a child. There were three people, but one walked ahead and one was driving the cows. But the cows saw something like that; they were afraid so they galloped abruptly. [The driver] could not control the cows, so his child fell down. The cartwheel went over him and he died.

The driver of the cart beat his cows to death after the incident, but Yay Chan knew it was not their fault: 'they saw something over there that's why they got surprised' she said. I asked her what she had seen. 'It looked human' she replied, 'but after the incident, it disappeared.' She had only seen it that one time, and had not herself been haunted, but many other people had been. Like Koh Sop, the land around Choeung Ek had grown wild during Democratic Kampuchea, and much of it had returned to forest (*prei*). Ghosts stalked the area, haunting not only the site where people were killed, but also the roads around it. Some people making the long treks back to their homes tried to rest the night in the buildings remaining at Choeung Ek, but the noise of the ghosts wailing and crying drove them out.

The looting of Choeung Ek's graves began soon after liberation, and although government led, many of the people from the villages surrounding the site came to seek their fortunes. As in Koh Sop, some were luckier than others. Bu Soth searched several graves, but found nothing. The dead helped the family of Bong Broh meanwhile, allowing many of them to find small amounts of gold that they were able to exchange for food when times got tough. He found an earring, his younger sister a necklace, and his mother found gold on several occasions. Initially the family was concerned that the dead would come and demand them back. But they bought offerings and dedicated them to those who had given them the gold and helped them survive: chicken, fruit and other snacks.

I gave an offering to the *khmouch* who allowed me to find the gold. I burnt incense and said thank you so much for helping me to find this: "Now I put rice, snacks, alcohol and food and boiled chicken for you."

Having done so the dead were appeased and never returned, except to help.

Seeing the ways the dead were helping some of those returning to the site, others sought their aid. Hoping to make a connection between herself and the dead, Dara, who lives close to the site, went to handle the bones; 'I touched the bones in case they had some fortune,' she told me. It seemed to work; although she did not find any gold, the ghosts never haunted her, and her family remained well.

In 1983 Tep Vong, one of the monks initially inaugurated following the PRK, brought a delegation of monks and foreign dignitaries to the site. 'He bought people from India, Japan and elsewhere' Om Ta, who has worked at the site for many years, told me. 'The foreign visitors brought their own monks.' The corpses were still stacked around the edges of the graves at this point; it was several months before a *p'teah khmouch* was built to house them, and in the meantime they remained exposed on the surface. 'They looked white like mushrooms.'

Like Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek was an important part of the political construction of the regime and its liberation (see chapter five). The visit of Tep Vong was as much an opportunity to show the site to these dignitaries as it was to perform any rituals, however, it enabled the dead to be brought back into the appropriate ritual control, and therefore calmed them down. Although they had been helping certain individuals, this calming united the dead and allowed them to start helping the site as a whole. 'Before, they could not rest. But after we invited the monks, who prayed and dedicated many good things to them, they kind of calmed down' Om Ta explained.

Following Tep Vong's visit the site opened to visitors. A steady trickle of tourists and dignitaries began to visit, and over the years the numbers steadily increased,

during the high season when I was there up to 1,000 people visited per day. Although ghosts are usually frightened of the living, as we have already seen, although scared, the dead from the Khmer Rouge were also lonely and seeking their families. The steady stream of visitors made the dead happy because they were not lonely anymore. It also enabled them to further establish their relationships with the living, and in return for allowing them to visit and the site to be developed the dead received merit and could be reborn. Only three families (those of the guards) live at Choeung Ek, so the building of relationships had less urgency and were less individually based than in Koh Sop, where the living needed to negotiate with the dead in order to reach agreement to live alongside them. At Choeung Ek the negotiation was not for living space, but for working space, and to enable the site to be used as a tourist site and state memorial.

Bu Soth told me that though he agrees with some people who criticize the site for making money 'on the back of dead people,' maybe the dead do not mind, because they rarely visit people in their dreams anymore, and since the development of the site, the only person to become sick did so because he angered the *Neak Ta* who lives by the lake. The development of the site is permitted by the dead, who allow their graves to be displayed, their remains to be exhibited, and their clothing to be collected, because they want their country to develop, part of which they enable:

They find peace because they are Khmer. They want to develop the country. They want the next generation to prosper. That is why I think their deaths... their lives.... they help us who are still alive.... Only the bones are here [now], but if the spirits were here they would feel warm because their deaths are valuable already.

The value of their deaths lies in the development of the site and the country as a whole. Bong La, who works as a guide at the site, and who regularly interacts with spirits of the dead, considered this to be integral to why the dead at Choeung Ek have long since been at peace, and have been able to move on in their incarnations. By receiving merit from those they help (individually and collectively), they have accumulated karma, and most have been reborn (as we will see in the next chapter):

a couple of years ago, in my dream, I saw five Vietnamese, four or five Vietnamese, go to my home in Phnom Penh. You know what they said? They said 'Don't worry – I am free now! I am peaceful now!' They were wearing nice shirts and then... they were gone! So it's just like that now; they have a new life. It's just like, I told myself– it seems like they were telling me that they have a new life now. And now they have gone to a good place or somewhere else, I don't know.... They are doing well.

## **Discussion**

These ethnographic descriptions detail the changing relationships between the living and those who were killed by the Khmer Rouge. Fuelled with fear, confusion, and massive displacement, these relationships initially consisted of distrustful and fearful interactions, however, over time, reciprocal relations began to be re-established, with the dead in Koh Sop helping the living rebuild their lives and survive in the chaotic and difficult post-conflict environment, and those in Choeung Ek helping enable development to the country and thus helping the Khmer people survive in the global market. These reciprocal relations helped the dead receive merit, which enabled them to rebuild their karma, and in both

locations, most have now been reborn. Only those with particularly bad karma (see chapter four) remain, but these are powerless and simply waiting to be reborn.

One morning as I sat with Lōk Om, an elderly man who lives in the South of Cambodia, our conversation turned to ghosts. I was having difficulty understanding the many ways in which the living are connected to the dead, so to explain why the dead continue existing in Cambodia, he told me an old Khmer folktale:

Once there lived a farmer. Every day he tended his rice field, and because it was far from the village, and very quiet, he often slept there, alone in a small cottage. One day a beautiful spirit saw him sleeping alone. She came to play with him every night, and the two fell in love. The farmer was not simply an ordinary man – he was a Kru who knew some magic, which he used to call the spirit to live in a dead body. She entered through the head, and he trapped her inside, using a tick<sup>115</sup> to seal the hole. The Kru and his spirit wife had a happy life and over time she forgot she was a spirit and gave birth to a child. One day she was walking in the forest with her child and her head was very itchy where the tick was. She scratched, but the itching wouldn't stop, so she asked her child to kill the tick for her. The child pulled the tick out, and the spirit escaped the body, leaving a dead body as the parent of the child. So this is why the spirits must stay with the living nowadays.

He used this story to show me how the living and the dead are interdependent and it is only with the recognition of each other, and mutual support, that either can survive. It took me some time to comprehend this notion, and it was only

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<sup>115</sup> In some versions of the story the farmer knocks a nail into the head to seal the hole.

through the examination of the changing status of those killed under the Khmer Rouge that I fully grasped its meaning.

Within the literature, discussions of ghosts, spirits, and other manifestations of the dead often confines them to one category, suggesting that alongside their liminal status, there is a permanence of demeanour and disposition of the dead in whichever form they take. This is particularly the case for ghosts, who, as discussed earlier, have primarily been viewed as liminal beings who are unable to escape their deaths and therefore exist outside the social structure. In discussing the notion of memory as a moral practice, Michael Lambek (1996: 241) argues that every time spirits appear, they provide new ways of conceiving and revising narratives of the past:

Central to spirits are their narrative and performative functions. Spirits are vehicles *for* memory rather than the frozen remnants of memory.

It could be argued that this is how narratives of the dead from the Khmer Rouge are utilized. However, to see them only as vehicles for narration and evolving understandings is somewhat limiting in Cambodia, where the dead are as constitutive of contemporary social order and stability as the living. As Langford (2009: 682) states, in her examination of the ghosts encountered by Khmer diaspora, the dead in Cambodia are 'tangible participants in [the] violated socialities of living and dead.' As we have seen in this chapter, the ghosts of those killed under the Khmer Rouge were neither liminal nor metaphorical, but socially salient beings, whose status and emotions changed alongside those of the living, and nowadays have all but disappeared.

As Om Yay told me, those killed by the Khmer Rouge were considered to have died like dogs (*khmouch chikkei*), and to be *khmouch dtai hong* – sufferers of a violent death, who had died without ceremony. As such their place in the world was confused, and they would not as easily be able to move onto their next life. Displaced from their families they became anonymous, wandering dead, and the fear and loneliness this induced caused them to haunt the living. In order for them to accumulate karma to assist in their rebirth, they needed to receive merit from the living; to do this they needed to engage in reciprocal relationships of support with the living<sup>116</sup>, something that was only possible if they became recognised, individualised (even without names) and thereby incorporated into the social world of the living. Kwon notes that in Vietnam the liberation of the ghosts from grievous death is a two way process, in which the ghosts have a responsibility to work towards their freedom by showing their will and engaging in ritual intimacy with the living (Kwon 2008b: 164). The same can be said for the dead of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, although their relationships were not made explicit through ritual, but through everyday interactions of support.

Remaining for a moment with Kwon, he shows us how performing the correct rituals for the dead (i.e. being able to feed ones relatives), and being able to rebury them in appropriate sites and engage in appropriate care transactions (being able to feed them again), allowed the dead to be brought in from the streets (*duong*) to the home (*nha*). In Cambodia the distinction is not between the home and the streets, but between the town or homeland (*srok*) and the forest (*prei*): ghosts who are confused, wandering, and lonely, live in the forests,

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<sup>116</sup> In this way they resemble the *Neak Ta*, who require reciprocal relationships to survive, and the land spirits of Timor Leste, who had to be re-animated following people's return to their land in order to regain stability (Bovensiepen 2009).



whilst those who have been properly integrated into social life belong to the *srok*. As the rituals in Vietnam brought the dead in from the streets to the home, the changing relationships between the dead and the living in Cambodia over time allowed the living to bring the dead in from the forest. In so doing they helped alleviate their loneliness, which stopped the dead from haunting. It also enabled the dead to make relationships with the living, by helping them make connections with people who would give offerings for them. By helping them the dead would gain merit, and so accumulate karma to help their rebirth.

During the Khmer Rouge regime the most successful tool of killing was the propaganda that enabled the cadre to dehumanise the living in order to work them to death, starve them of life, and for those who worked as executioners, to murder people then abandon the bodies (Hinton 2005).<sup>117</sup> After the regime the dehumanisation continued, first in the international community's disinterest in the consequences of the regime, and then in the state's appropriation of the dead in their writing of history (see chapters five to seven). From a superficial glance, the looting of the graves that occurred in the period immediately after the regime could be considered a continuation of this dehumanisation, and if it were not for the ghosts, perhaps it would be. However, unlike in Jewish Poland, where Zuzanna Dziuban (2014) argues that the looting of the graves of Holocaust victims was a result of the cultural framing of certain dead, where memory politics framed them in such a way that the Jewish dead were not only dehumanised, but rendered invisible and therefore open to looting, in Cambodia looting the graves was not a continuation of the dehumanization of those killed under the Khmer

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<sup>117</sup> Cambodia is not unique in this: Nazi Germany; Soviet Russia; Mao's China – all enforced regimes that perpetuated the dehumanisation of the population to achieve their goals.

Rouge because it could only occur if the dead allowed it; as such they were vital beings in the negotiation of this activity.

The looting was an aspect of reciprocal relations between the living and the dead: by unearthing them, and therefore allowing their remains to be collected and stored together, the living were bringing the dead 'in from the forest.' By giving offerings to them they helped send them merit. The dead provided support to the living by allowing their teeth to be removed, or their clothes taken without punishing those who did it. Those who disrespected the dead became ill, or were visited in their dreams and told how to rectify the situation. These relationships enabled the dead to be enfolded into the life of the living, which helped them be reborn. This was not necessarily an easy transaction for either the living or the dead, but one that was necessary and understood, as one of my informants explained:

Once I found an oil lamp that had some gold and three watches in it. I lifted up and I shook it and found all that inside. I started crying; I just felt so sorry for them. I thought to myself, "Both you and I love our belongings. But now you have died, leaving your belongings." I found it but I sold it to feed my children. We didn't have anything after the liberation. I cried so hard because I felt so sorry for them [the dead]. But the thing didn't last for long because I kept selling pieces of it to buy rice and food for my children. I still feel very thankful to the owner. Even now, when I pray at home, I think of the owner. I think about how they had saved our lives. I survived from that, so please be blessed and be reborn in a safe place. I can never forget what they did for us.

It was through these relationships that the dead could be re-humanised, brought in from the forest and back to the homeland, and therefore able to transition

from being frightened beings that haunt, to dead engaged in relationships with the living. In her book *Consoling Ghosts* (2013) Jean Langford argues that the dead of the Khmer Rouge could never transition to be benevolent ancestors, arguing that these dead are forever stuck as *preta* or *khmouch*, and cannot transform to different states of being. However, at both Koh Sop and Choeung Ek the dead were able to make this transition. This was only possible because of the negotiations between the living and the dead, which were only possible because of the cosmological order of Khmer society.

As explored in the previous chapter, all incarnations of the dead, including ghosts, exist within the accepted Buddhist realms of existence. As such they are subject to some kind of metaphysical birth and death, and are subject to reincarnation in the way that animals and humans are. While in Vietnam ghosts (*co bac*) belong neither to the world of the living nor the world of the dead (Kwon 2008b) in Cambodia, *khmouch* belong to both - they are both recently deceased corpses and ghosts of those who have recently died. Anyone can become a *khmouch*, and everyone will (although not everyone will become a *khmouch loung* - haunting ghost). The *khmouch* that people encounter are often known to them, and ghosts therefore are relatives of someone. If they are not known, then some sort of relationship is considered to exist of which the living is unaware: a connection from a previous life for example, as we saw in the case of Yay and the *khmouch* whose tooth she found. In addition to being connected, *khmouch* also represent beings that humans may become through re-incarnation and death events.

The difference in the directionality of the help and support given by the dead illustrates how the dead replicate the political lives of the living. Those living and

working at Choeung Ek are highly conscious of its use in building the image of contemporary Cambodia in the eyes of the foreigners who make up the majority of its visitors. They are also aware that Cambodia depends heavily on foreign aid for its continued economic growth, and that it is foreign aid agencies who support the poorest and most vulnerable of the nation. At the end of every formal interview I would ask the interviewee if there was anything else they thought it was important for me to know. The answers focused on one theme: that when I returned home I should tell people about Cambodia; its terrible history and how poor the people are now, and by doing so bring help to the nation. Sites such as Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng were considered important in this mission by many of my informants (see chapter six).

The dead of Choeung Ek also recognized the outwardly facing aspect of the site, and though, like Koh Sop, they gave some individual support, their aid to the living was mostly nationally faced. Whilst in Vietnam worship of the ghosts of war was banned by the government (because it was seen as evidence of an undeveloped nation (Kwon 2008b: 11), in Cambodia, politicians incorporated the dead from the Khmer Rouge into their campaigns. Paying attention to the dead in the unstable years after liberation was an important part of political control for the ruling party. Annual events held at mass gravesites include *bangskol* ceremonies and the leading politicians ensured that not only did they reassure the public, but also the dead.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Hun Sen is particularly aware of the political power of relations with the dead, and often uses it in his propaganda. After lighting Sihanouk's funeral pyre he claimed the spirit of the late King was waiting for him, because they have a special connection (Meas 2013). While campaigning before the 2013 general elections, he claimed that a shooting star was viewed in the sky the night his eldest son was born, suggesting he is the reincarnation of a powerful *Neak Ta* with connections to Cambodia's creation (Vannarin 2013b). In the past he has claimed to be the reincarnation of

The calming of the ghosts that occurred when Tep Vong led a delegation to Choeung Ek was not only about re-establishing the relationships needed for the survival of both the living and the dead; it also enabled the country to start rebuilding itself in the post-conflict era. The dead at Choeung Ek played a central role in this and continue to do so to date; it is because they support peace and development that the bones of the dead can be displayed and their graves exploited. In Koh Sop, the dead helped the living through individual relationships of material support. This too replicated the political positioning of the living there, who, distant from the national and international ambitions of the government, struggled individually to regain stability and security in post-KR Cambodia.

## **Conclusion**

The dead in post-KR Cambodia were chaotic and terrifying to the living. But this was not because of any malevolent intent; it was a hostility based in fear and insecurity. If we refer back to Van Gennep's statements about the importance of funeral rites, he comments that the dead who have not received proper treatment are hostile because they cannot gain access to either the world of the living or the dead (van Gennep 1960 [1908]: 160). The relationships re-established in Cambodia in each locality were an important aspect of re-asserting control and order in the post-conflict chaos. Their demise over time has paralleled the political stability of the country and its people. In the years immediately after

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Sdech Kan, a sixteenth century fighter who took the Khmer throne after killing a supposedly corrupt king (Noren-Nillson 2013). By using such narratives, Hun Sen connects himself and his family both directly to royalty, but more importantly to the powerful spiritual world that orders Khmer society.

the liberation, the country was still wild: full of forest that needed taming and controlling; full of dead that needed the same.

King Father Norodom Sihnaouk, Cambodia's former leader, once said that if Cambodia was modernised its ghosts would disappear. As the population has grown, and the country has become more and more urbanised, the dead of the Khmer Rouge have diminished in their power. However, this is not so much a reflection of modernity as it is about stability and security. The modernisation of Cambodia has led to the wild 'forests' of Cambodia being brought under control, which eliminates the elements that led to insecurity – the Khmer Rouge for example, who lived and fought in the forests (in a recent bout of political posturing, Hun Sen, the current Prime Minister threatened a return to the forests if more cadre were to be charged by the Khmer Rouge trials, a statement suggesting war and the resurgence of the Khmer Rouge in contemporary Cambodia).

Controlling and eliminating the 'forest' not only creates a space where the dead cannot live, but it also allows them to be brought back into acceptable society; although they may have lost their kin, and therefore those who would usually care for them, the establishment of new relations through assisting the living enabled new networks to be created, which both the living and the dead could benefit from. Bringing them in from the forest enabled the dead to transition to benevolent beings, which eventually helped them accumulate karma to be reborn. Unlike Timor Leste, where 'past conflicts have saturated the landscape with the spirits of people who were killed, some of whom were not properly buried' (Bovensiepen 2009: 336), Cambodia's danger comes not from the dead,

but from the living, because, as this chapter shows, those killed under the regime have now become harmless, or, in the majority of cases, have been reborn, as the next chapter will explore.

## **Chapter four: Karma and reincarnation in the killing fields**

Srey is reincarnated. Killed by the Khmer Rouge as a young boy in Vietnam, her spirit had to wait for over 20 years to be reborn. When it was, it was with Lōk Om, a former Khmer Rouge cadre in his mid-40s who lives in Southern Cambodia.

Despite the long waiting period, Srey's karma was good: she was reborn into the human realm, and into a relatively prosperous family. Also killed as a child, Lōk Om's son, Broh, has also been reborn. He is now part of another family in the village, but Lōk Om sees him occasionally, often giving money and gifts to him when he does.

Most Khmer are, to borrow Obeyesekere's phrase (2002: 176), 'karma-bound beings'. Their lives are enmeshed in theories of karma and reincarnation, and in the presence of the very socially active spirits who imbue the landscape.

Following death, rebirth always happens, and karma deems when and where it will be. Along with moral ordering, and extending and elaborating networks of kinships, reincarnation and karma also relate to concepts of justice and to the ways the dead are reintegrated into the lives of the living; it is these aspects that will be discussed in this chapter. Here I am interested in karma and reincarnation as social practices and concepts that, although coming from Buddhism canon, are played out in everyday life. Reincarnation and karma were not initial research interests, however, I heard stories of rebirth from mass graves almost from the first day I was in Cambodia, and many people invoked the Buddhist notion of karma to explain the mass death and destruction wrought by the Khmer Rouge, and their own survival against the odds. It soon became clear that these are



important aspects of how Khmer people today narrate and normalise the mass death that occurred during the regime.

This chapter considers the place that Buddhism plays in the negotiation of the ruptures that follow the mass death and disruption caused by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. It is about imagined and regenerated continuities – between the past and the present, between the living and the dead - and the integral place that Buddhism plays in this. But by considering how the dislocations and discontinuities caused by the Khmer Rouge regime are narrated and normalised in contemporary Cambodia it is also about how aspects of Buddhism work to help maintain stability and some kind of peace in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia through imagined connections and linkages between the past and the present.

Using Lambek's (2013) concept of the continuous and discontinuous person that connects historical periods as well as persons, I will argue that the Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation are means by which many Khmer people come to understand and narrate the 'tragedy of Cambodian history' (Chandler 1993), and in so doing, to normalise and integrate mass death into an expected aspect of life, one that can be talked about and related to the wider cosmology of Khmer life. I will explore how different incarnations enable a continuity and connection between different historical eras, particularly the periods of peace before the regime and now, and enable the extension of social networks and a form of re-incorporative kinship. The justice provided by the notion of karma will be explored, before examining how, in Cambodia, the stability of both Buddhism and animism enabled those who died during the Khmer Rouge to be swiftly re-incorporated into everyday life following the regime's demise.

## Theoretical background

In recent years, anthropologists have used reincarnation (and to a lesser extent, karma) as a conceptual tool to explore various aspects of social life in the communities in which it exists. Anne Bennett (2006) examines reincarnation amongst the Druze - an Islamic sect in the Levantine Middle East - where reincarnation is a common, though contested, belief. She argues that reincarnation enhances sect unity and identity amongst the Druze, something of extreme social significance for this marginal and excluded community. Anya Bernstein (2012) examines how concepts of reincarnation are used politically by Buryats in Siberia as a means of reinforcing or contesting Russian political rule of the area<sup>119</sup>, while in her study of the Wari of Western Brazil, Beth Conklin (2001) notes that a belief that their ancestors were reborn as peccaries brought great comfort to the living, because it offered them the chance to meet their relatives again after death.

Other anthropologists have used reincarnation as a lens through which to examine the cultural specificity of concepts of personhood and the formation of beings. Robertson (2011) discusses rebirth as a challenge to the Cartesian gap, arguing that reincarnated beings subvert the Cartesian separation between mind and body, and that rather than discrete phenomena, mind and body are 'emergent properties of ... the process of becoming,' which occurs between people and where 'personal identities may temporarily merge' (Robertson 2011: 585). Akhil Gupta (2002) uses reincarnation as a theoretical tool to explore concepts of childhood and kinship, illustrating the 'cultural specificity of

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<sup>119</sup> Bringing to mind the recent Dalai Lama's threat not to reincarnate if Tibet remains under Chinese control and the controversy this has caused (Kazi 2015).

constructions of the life course' (Gupta 2002: 42). Like Gupta, Alma Gottlieb (2004) explores alternative conceptualisations of childhood as well as cultural differences in child-rearing practices between North America and her research community of the Beng in Côte d'Ivoire, where children are reborn from *wrugbe* – spirit villages where the dead reside between lives. She argues for an anthropology of infancy that considers infants' lives 'texts to be read' (Gottlieb 2004: 53) so that we might better appreciate both the cultural constructions of childhood and assumptions related to it within anthropological practice.<sup>120</sup>

Amongst Khmer scholars, where Buddhism and its place in the reconfiguration of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia has been extensively explored (many within Kent and Chandler's (2008) edited volume *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*), little attention is paid to these concepts, despite several authors touching upon aspects of Buddhism relating directly to them. Judy Ledgerwood (2008) examines merit making in rural Kandal province (the primary aim of which is to accumulate karma to improve the next life), but does not discuss its implications for rebirth. Eve Zucker (2013) discusses the rebuilding of morality in post-DK Cambodia, but despite karma and reincarnation being influential factors in this, pays them little attention. In his discussion of the politics of memory in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, Alexander Hinton considers the notions of 'karma, merit and action' (Hinton 2008: 76),

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<sup>120</sup> Readers interested in discussions of the origins of reincarnation belief systems should turn to Obeyesekere's book *Imagining Karma* (2002). In this he compares theories of reincarnation in several West African, Melanesian and Amerindian communities to the rebirth theories of classical Greek philosophers and Buddhist scripture. In doing so he provides an argument for the 'ethicization' of reincarnation, suggesting that ethicized forms of reincarnation ('karmic eschatologies'), where ethical behaviour controls your fortune in the next life, evolved out of non-ethicised forms ('rebirth eschatologies') where people are simply reborn in an endless cycle. Osbourne (2007) argues that it is the other way around, whilst Burley (2013) contests the notion of any kind of ordering or priority to the development of different forms.

however, these discussions are brief, and reincarnation receives no attention beyond a fleeting mention. One exception is Erik Davies (2008), who discusses the continuing lives of 'Miss Yaan,' using her recollections of past lives, and the ways in which she uses them to extend her kinship networks, as a mode of exploring how moral ordering is articulated in everyday life. He argues that in remembering her past lives, Miss Yaan enacts many of the cultural tensions experienced by Cambodian people today, and finds socially accepted ways to negotiate these.

Of most resonance to this chapter, however, is Lambek's (2013) article 'The Continuous and Discontinuous Person: Two Dimensions of Ethical Life.' In this Lambek suggests two perceptions of the person: continuous (which he labels forensic) and discontinuous (mimetic in his terminology). Forensic persons are continuous because, whilst being unique, their identity is consistent over time and they 'carry moral responsibility for past and future deeds': they are the 'cumulative product of the acts in which she has engaged or been engaged and for which she holds herself accountable' (Lambek 2013: 838). Mimetic persons are discontinuous beings who 'draw from a set of named *personnages* or *dramatis personae* that they 'become', 'inhabit', 'play', 'personify', 'imitate', or 'impersonate' alternately and discontinuously, or possibly successively or simultaneously' (ibid).

Rather than concentrating on these different aspects of personhood, I want to pick up Lambek's connection between reincarnated persons and temporality. In a brief section of his paper, Lambek extends Geertz's assertion in *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali* (1973) that personhood and historicity are intrinsically linked. Reincarnated persons have characteristics of their former incarnation that enable

them to become “characters’ in a poesis of history who exemplify a past epoch’ (Lambek 2013: 847). He refers to these people as ‘*dramatis personnae*’; as with actors in plays, those reincarnated from a previous era can distance themselves from everyday life and connect themselves, and others, to a previous time. By doing so, they enable ‘imaginative and retrospective identifications and connections between historical periods’ (Lambek 2013: 847).

Within the sphere of reincarnation and karma related to the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, these identifications and connections perform several functions: they provide a means with which the dead can be reincorporated into social life via connections with the living; they provide stability in the continuance they offer between the period before the Khmer Rouge and the present, and in the assurance that, despite their efforts to destroy it, Buddhism and its central tenants survived and continue to order lives in contemporary Cambodia. In addition they provide a form of justice: those who died did so because of their karma; those with good karma have been reborn, and those with bad karma (such as the Khmer Rouge cadre) will suffer in successive lives to come.

### **Reincarnation and karma in Khmer Buddhism**

Reincarnation (*ka kert loeng vinh* - literally, birth again - or *ka kert m’dong teat* - birth once more) and karma (*kamm*) are central tenants of Buddhist doctrine. Buddha himself cycled through many lives before he reached enlightenment, and all beings, living and dead, exist in *samsara*, the eternal cycle of death and rebirth, dying and being reborn in different realms of existence in continued *dukkha* (suffering) according to their karma. Merit making is at the core of Buddhist practice in Cambodia (Ledgerwood 2008); the aim of merit making is to improve

one's karma or the karma of a relative or friend, so that rebirth might be quicker and to an improved status. Reincarnation and karma, therefore, form the central driving force of Buddhist action in Cambodia, and as such, their influence on the lives of my informants was profound.

With Buddhism forbidden during Democratic Kampuchea, formal rituals could not be conducted for the piles of dead that began to mount; while they lay rotting across the country or unceremoniously dumped in mass graves, public displays of grief and mourning were also forbidden. Om Yay, an elderly woman who sold vegetables in the shop close to my house, explained this to me one evening as we sat chatting. Late in the regime her husband was taken to be 'educated,' a common euphemism for execution. She knew he had been killed, but because public grieving was not allowed, remained silent. At night the local cadre would come to the home that she shared with her mother, listening to see if they were crying. They would ask her 'do you miss your husband?' Knowing they were looking for others to kill, she would answer no; 'if they saw us crying they would take us too' she told me.<sup>121</sup> All they could do was give offerings to the spirits, and beg her husband to come back to them:

My mother said if you are reincarnated, please come to be reincarnated with your family, and please, your spirit be happy.

Regardless of its public banning, many of the cosmological concepts of Buddhism continued to exist throughout the regime, and even some rituals were practiced, though in mediated and adapted forms (see LeVine (2010) for a comprehensive exploration of these adaptations). As Judy Ledgerwood (2008: 148) explains in a

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<sup>121</sup> This enforced muteness is explored in chapter seven.

paper on contemporary Buddhist practice in rural Cambodia, Buddhist modes of 'thinking, feeling, speaking, moving,' were learned as children and 'embodied as habitus;' they continued to be important despite (or perhaps because of) attempts to destroy them. Buddhist religious concepts offered a mode of narrating and normalising the events occurring and could not be destroyed precisely because of their metaphysical nature. Reincarnation and karma became particularly salient due to the massive number of dead created by the regime; even as people were dying, those around them explained it as karma, and waited for them to be reborn.

As we saw in chapter three, even in the years immediately after Democratic Kampuchea, when the Khmer Rouge rule was replaced with the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), public mourning for those lost during Democratic Kampuchea was scarcely possible due to the tight control of religion and the parity of monks. Many rituals therefore remained unpractised until the late 1980s and early 1990s as people struggled to rebuild their lives.

In this period, most of the dead remained in their graves; those scattered across the fields were either gathered up and moved to a nearby pagoda, or, as happened in my rural fieldsites, simply covered over with soil. Those that were unearthed were quickly subsumed as vehicles of the new state's legitimization and political propaganda (see chapters one and five). However, even once Buddhist rituals were re-established, few occurred for the dead, either individually or collectively. They did not need to be, because the dead would be reborn, with or without ceremonies, as explained to me one afternoon by a Venerable monk from the Buddhist University of Phnom Penh:

Even if there are no monks, dead people will still be reincarnated. The ones that have good karma will be reincarnated faster than the one who have bad karma.... All the spirits have sought their world already.

‘Imagine a worm moving,’ he said. ‘As it pulls its back up, its front is pushed forwards - it is in constant movement. That’s how we move through our lives – before leaving our current life we are already touching the future one; death in this life pushes us into the next. It is *‘jud ti padi santi’* in Pali: passing away and rebirth.’

I had come to ask him to explain the Pali Canon<sup>122</sup> related to karma and reincarnation, because I was trying to better understand these concepts. ‘Our teaching is a little bit deviated from popular belief now’ he said. ‘Many people believe that a person dies, but does not necessarily take up their new existence or new life immediately. It can take days, months, or even years.’ This supported the stories I had heard so far: many people from my fieldsites had told me that the time of rebirth related to your karma: good karma leads to a quick rebirth; with bad karma it could take a long, long time. When they talked about deaths during the Khmer Rouge period, my informants used this to distinguish between the deaths of the Khmer Rouge cadre (the Pol Pots), and the seemingly ‘innocent’ victims: the victims (usually the relatives or friends of the person talking) had been reborn quickly, because even though their karma caused their untimely death during Democratic Kampuchea, its manner had been at the hands of others.

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<sup>122</sup> The Pali Canon (*Tipitaka*) is a collection of scriptures written in Pali, which record the Theravada Buddhism’s *Dhamma* – the official teachings and doctrine of Theravada Buddhism. The monk informed me that it is the oldest of the Buddhist Canons, and the only one still existing in its original language.



The cadre, meanwhile, took a long time to be reborn. Some of them are still waiting.

‘Most people think when they [the dead] can be reborn goes along with the actions of their family – they have to *tvea bon* (do meritorious deeds – literally ‘doing ceremonies’) that can be transferred to the dead,’ the Venerable monk told me. ‘They pass them karma.’ These deeds are not only about helping the dead to be reborn in *samsara* – the continual cycle of death and rebirth that Buddhists live in. They also help the dead to progress in that cycle towards *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*) – the quality of complete nothingness that ends the suffering inherent in the cycle of *samsara*, as laid out in the Pali canon:

This is peace, this is exquisite — the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Nibbana. (Access to Insight 2013: Anada 3.32)

In order to reach *nibbana*, people must accumulate karma, which provides the force to affect the realms of existence into which they are born. Karma is action, and is accumulated through life. ‘You know, karma is not in every thing you do’ the monk explained. ‘It is only in intentional action, you know - something you do with will.’ Unintentional activities do not affect your karma: a karmic act is one where an intention to act is then carried out. ‘An act of killing’ he said ‘has many factors. But it is the intention to kill and then enacting it that makes it karma.’

These acts accumulate and affect your next incarnation: the karmic force determines into which of the six realms of *samsara*<sup>123</sup> you will be reborn: as an

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<sup>123</sup> Within the six realms are thirty-one planes of existence, each in a strict hierarchy of being.

avatar (an incarnated god), a bodhisattva (a Buddha to be - someone who has reached enlightenment, but refrains from entering *nibbana* to help others); a human; animal; spirit; or into *tanarout* - the Khmer underworld. Reincarnation is inevitable for all beings (including the dead), but where, when, and with whom rebirth occurs, is affected by karma, which is accumulated through this, and previous lives. Whilst karma cannot be deleted, meritorious acts enable the accumulation of good karma, which adds karmic force to the transition in the next life. In this way, historical and contemporary actions affect the life cycle of those in *samsara* and future positioning in the world.

One of the ways in which karma can affect your rebirth is by affecting the family into which you are born. The bonds of affection that tie people to each other in this life cross the boundaries of life and death, and can ensure the rebirth of the dead with their kin, particularly if their karma is good. The assurance of reincarnation in Cambodia allows for the possibility of reunion at some point – if not in this life, perhaps in the next one. This is true for the dead as much as it is for the living: the dead want to be amongst people they know and trust ('they are lonely, and worried about us' Om Yay explained).<sup>124</sup> But the place of the dead is at the site of their death – it is hard for them to leave and travel (in time or space) unless the force of their karma is particularly strong. Distance in time fades the memory of the dead, and they become more likely to be reborn amongst those living close to the place at which they died. Sometimes it is simply a question of timing – a pregnancy has to coincide with the time when the dead are ready to be reborn, which depends upon their karma.

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<sup>124</sup> The ties of affection in Cambodia are not restricted to those reborn within the human sphere but can extend into different realms of existence as well: the cousin of one of my informants remembers a previous incarnation where, following her death as a human, she was reborn as a cow, but within her same family.

Though I use them in this chapter as concepts to explore means by which people in contemporary Cambodia normalise the mass deaths that occurred during the Khmer Rouge regime, it is important to note that reincarnation and karma, unlike other aspects of Buddhist doctrine, are concrete phenomena of everyday life in Cambodia. They are neither idioms nor symbolic expressions of relationships and the consequences of action. As such, they materialise connections between periods of time, people and places, and make evident the effects of moral (dis)order.

### **Ethnographic case studies**

Having outlined the place of reincarnation and karma within Khmer Buddhism, I will now provide three ethnographic examples that illustrate how these concepts are used to understand, narrate and normalise the mass deaths that occurred during the Khmer Rouge regime, explain the survival of many against the odds, and provide a means of embodied justice. The first, from Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, shows how nameless dead are reintegrated into social life by being reborn amongst those living and working at the site. The second examines how relationships ruptured during the regime are rebuilt in the present, and new connections are forged and extended across family groups and disparate communities. The final example explores how justice is understood through the notion of karma and reincarnation.

### **Reintegrating the nameless dead**

Da was introduced to me one morning by the Ta Ta, an elderly man whose family home was in the village behind the center. Knowing I was interested in the graves

and those with connections to them, he advised me to speak to Da: 'she got pregnant from the graves,' he told me. Da's son is the reincarnation of someone buried in the mass graves at Choeung Ek: his spirit came to her when she climbed into a pit to loot it in the early 1980s.

It was Chinese New Year, and the village was quiet; most of the families on the street are Khmer-Chinese and had gone to visit family, or were visiting local pagodas to ask for fortune for the coming year. Da and her family, however, consider themselves *Khmer soth* – pure Khmer – and so were at home. The day was cool by Cambodian standards and it was a pleasant walk through the dusty village. As my research assistant and I walked along the street I could hear crickets chirping in the fields, and the distant sound of cars on the road that passed the center. Da invited us in to her home to chat. We sat on the bamboo platform under the stilts of her wooden house. Chickens scratched the floor around us, sometimes jumping up on to the platform only to be shooed away by Da.

During the regime Da had been evacuated only a few kilometres away. She returned home soon after liberation, but like others in the village, was unaware of the graves at Choeung Ek until government employees started unearthing them, and the stench of rotting flesh spread around the countryside (see chapter one). Word soon reached the village that valuables had been found in the graves, and people started going to see what they could find: 'other people found gold, so I wanted it, too,' Da told me. 'Some found necklaces and rings, and I even saw some diamonds.' Visiting the site one afternoon, she climbed into a grave full of bodies, and immediately started vomiting. Climbing out of the pit, she crawled

home; although her house was only 500m away it took her hours to make the journey.

She continued being ill for some weeks, and despite visiting a doctor, could receive no respite; 'I couldn't stop vomiting,' she said; 'I was so weak and I became so skinny that I had to sit on a pillow.' Elders told her that she must have angered the local *Neak Ta* – the guardian spirit of the area. Others told her she had disrespected her ancestors. But despite praying and giving offerings to both, she was still sick:

They said [the sickness] was because of wrong doings to the ancestors, so I gave offerings to the ancestors. And when they said it was the *Neak Ta*, I gave offerings to the *Neak Ta*. Whatever it was, I offered. I also went to the doctor for injections. It didn't help. So I stopped doing anything and just sat on the pillow. My husband carried me up and down.

Not knowing where else to turn, she visited a *Kru choal rūp*<sup>125</sup> (spirit medium) who told her she had not angered the spirits, but was pregnant with the reincarnation of someone from Choeung Ek. She recovered from her sickness once her son was born a few months later.

There are several reasons Da is certain that her son is reincarnated from the graves. The sickness started as soon as she climbed into the grave, and rather than waning over time, it continued all the way through her pregnancy, only stopping once she delivered the baby:

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<sup>125</sup> See chapter two, footnote 74 for an explanation of the different types of spirit medium.

It wasn't a normal morning sickness: it was terrible until I gave birth. I had morning sickness until I delivered, and as soon as I delivered, I felt so relieved. I no longer threw up or anything. As soon as he came out, I felt so well; I recovered.

As well as the sickness, the *Kru* had told her it was a spirit. But the sign that gives her complete certainty of his origins is her son's intelligence: 'he's so smart, so intelligent; today, he's a nurse.' Da's family is modest, and neither she nor her husband are educated, making Da reflect on the karma leading to her son's reincarnation:

I feel sorry for my son. I'm not sure if it was his bad karma or something, if that was why he became so, and why his destiny (*upanisaya*) was to be with me.

Da feels sorry for her son not because he was reborn - for that she is happy - but because (she believes) his karma has led to him being reborn in a lower social class than that he left. Those killed at Choeung Ek were almost entirely brought from Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh - the prison where high profile prisoners were taken, including those who posed the highest threat to the regime: lawyers, doctors, and the intelligentsia. In explaining how his karma had led to his rebirth with her, Da said:

there's sin and good deeds (*bāp / bon*). According to Buddhism, if you do good things, you will be reborn soon. If you have a lot of sin, it's not easy to be reborn. If you kill anyone or anything, you will not be reborn soon. If you have good karma, you can be reborn with those you know.

Da considered her son's death at Choeung Ek, and his rebirth into a modest, uneducated family, to be the result of his karma; although still human, she considered his status to be lowered.<sup>126</sup> In addition, he could not find his original family, and so had to be born with strangers. Those who died, she told me, were lonely because they could not find their families. But those ready to be reborn needed a place, and without being able to locate their friends or relatives (which is only possible for those with good karma), they had to reincarnate with those close to their graves. That is why her son had come to her.

Da's son is not the only person reborn from the graves at Choeung Ek. A few days after hearing this story I was sitting chatting with Bong La (who we met in chapter one). He was narrating a dream from a few days earlier, in which several Vietnamese people visited his home in Phnom Penh and told him they were free and he shouldn't worry about them. He realised it was people from the graves telling him they had been reborn and that they are at peace.

I asked him why those killed at Choeung Ek had visited him? 'I feel like my spirit was related to those people, or, maybe, I'm one of those persons but I came back now to tell the story,' he said. 'And not just me' he continued, 'my sons too.' He told me that both his sons are reincarnated from people in the mass graves at the site. His youngest son is the reincarnation of an Australian man killed there – he knows this because in a dream he met an Australian man, who left a canine tooth near a tree at Choeung Ek, which he picked up and held in his right hand. Another

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<sup>126</sup> As we saw in chapter one, whilst many of those imprisoned at Tuol Sleng and killed at Choeung Ek did come from high social classes, particularly in the early days of the regime, as time progressed and paranoia started to spread, the sites became the final locations for many Khmer Rouge cadre and their families. Although of high status within the regime some were from lower status origins with little or no education.

dream told him that his eldest son was also reincarnated from the mass graves – in the dream he saw a tooth<sup>127</sup> marked with Buddhist inscriptions, which he picked up and held it in his left hand. To Bong La this clearly indicates the left-handed writing of his first son. Other aspects of life now confirm his reincarnated status:

I realized why he only eats porridge (*Bor bor*)<sup>128</sup> now. Because during Pol Pot time you [he] ate porridge a lot, so now you [he] seem to like eating porridge....

Though life during the Khmer Rouge was difficult, it is the last memory of those who died during the regime, and memories or behaviours from that life are therefore carried with the reincarnated people to this life, particularly if they died young and therefore have little or no recollection of life before the regime to draw on. For Bong La's son, therefore, liking porridge is a behaviour from his previous life that is inherent to his persona: a form of habitus that cannot be removed. This is one of the discontinuities that Lambek (2013) refers to when he considers the discontinuous nature of reincarnated beings (though some might argue these to be continuities from the life before): whilst he has no recollection of his life before, Bong La's son embodies both his persona now, and aspects of his life before. In addition, his choice of food brings imaginary links to that period of history, when food was scarce and porridge the ration that most survived on.

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<sup>127</sup> Teeth have particular significance in Buddhist literature because, being the only skeletal element that are visible in life, they are deemed to represent 'what the body is and will become, and so serve as reminders of impermanence that help to bridge the divide between life and death' (Strong 2004: 180). Buddha's own teeth are part of the relics distributed across Asia following his death.

<sup>128</sup> Cambodian porridge (*Bor bor*) is usually made from chicken broth filled with meat or fish and vegetables. During the Khmer Rouge, however, rations were minute, and the porridge typically consisted of a spoonful of rice in salted water.



## **Repairing ruptured relations**

The second ethnographic encounter relates to the repair of relationships ruptured during the regime. In this section we meet Lōk Om, whose two children are reincarnated: his daughter is reincarnated from a Vietnamese boy killed during the regime, whilst his son, also killed during the regime, has been reborn to a different family in the village.

A man of around forty-five, Lōk Om is a former cadre of the Khmer Rouge, only leaving the movement in the 1990s when his commander (now village chief) agreed to peace terms. On a previous visit as an aside to a discussion about the peace negotiations Lōk Om told me that the Khmer Rouge shot his daughter, Srey. Although they had lost control of Cambodia in 1979, the Khmer Rouge had remained active and dangerous until the late 1990s when peace was finally assured, and at first I thought the shooting must have occurred during this latter period. I asked him what had happened.

‘They captured her and shot her,’ he told me. He called Srey over and pulling down the neck of her t-shirt, showed me a round puckered area of skin on her shoulder, just below her neck. I was shocked. Lōk Om sent Srey off to play, and I tried to find out what had happened. It took me a while to fully understand why Lōk Om had laughed at my shock: Srey had not been shot in this life, but in her previous one. That day the conversation moved on, but this particular morning I had gone back specifically to talk about Srey’s reincarnation.

It was raining when I got to Lōk Om’s house and he was taking advantage of the softening the rain gave to the baked soil to plough the rice field next to his house

in preparation for planting in the following weeks. When I arrived he stopped ploughing, releasing his cow to graze, and we moved to sit under the *sala*: a roofed bamboo shelter beneath the trees in his front yard, enjoying the relief the rain brought to the stifling humidity of Cambodia in June. As we talked, Srey ran around the yard, playing in the rain.

During the Khmer Rouge regime Srey had been a young Vietnamese boy from the border zone of Vietnam and Cambodia, close to Lök Om's house. The Khmer Rouge were particularly active in that area: in the latter parts of Democratic Kampuchea there had been regular border-raids into Vietnam; fighting was frequent and many casualties occurred as a result of offenses on both sides<sup>129</sup>. In one such border raid, the Khmer Rouge had captured the boy and shot him.

Years later Lök Om's wife, Yay-yay, was taking an afternoon nap in the hammock swinging under their house. As she dozed she started to dream. She was walking along a beach when she saw a *Neak dtien ehchai* – a spirit waiting to be reborn – collecting rocks. As she walked past the spirit he dropped the rocks and followed her. She told him to leave, but he refused, telling her 'I'm coming with you now.' When she woke from the dream<sup>130</sup> Yay-yay knew she was pregnant and that it was this boy. When Srey was born she had marks on her arms from the ligatures she had been tied in by the Khmer Rouge and two birthmarks where she had been shot: one on her backside and one on her shoulder - the mark that Lök Om had

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<sup>129</sup> A report from 1977 on the conflict recorded over 1,000 Vietnamese civilians being killed or wounded in the area between September and November 1977 (Kiernan 2007: 312). As a result of such actions, there are, according to some of my informants from the area, mass graves containing Khmer victims existing in Vietnam. I was not able to corroborate this during this research, but it could provide an interesting point for future work.

<sup>130</sup> This type of pregnancy dream, where a spirit visits the mother to be or, occasionally, a close relative of the mother, is relatively common, and is called *Su Ben Kor*.

showed me. Unlike some children, Srey did not remember her previous life, nor had anyone else recognized her. It was Yay-yay's dream that had told them.

Srey's karma had obviously been good, Lōk Om told me, because when she was reborn, it was as a human, and she had been able to change her life circumstances for the better, progressing from being 'Yuan' (a derogatory term used by many Khmer for Vietnamese people) to being Khmer. After telling me this, Lōk Om added: 'my son is also reborn.'

His son, Broh, also died and had now been reborn to another family in the village. 'He's about two years old' Srey interjected. Broh looks nothing like he did in his previous life, but they know it is him because during his mother considered terminating the pregnancy, but the boy's spirit visited her and asked her not to. Knowing Lōk Om, she felt she could not abort the foetus. I told the family I was sorry to hear about the boy's death. Lōk Om told me not to worry – everyone lost people, he was not alone. 'Anyway,' he told me 'it was his karma.'

Lōk Om regularly sees his son; he helps his new family support him by giving the child money and gifts. Sometimes he pays for his schoolbooks. His obligations towards Broh's new incarnation resemble those of a godparent: there is no direct responsibility, but it is expected that links will be made and support can be called on in times of need.

Both Srey and Broh's reincarnations were announced by spirits visiting their mothers in dreams, and for this reason both families accept the new incarnation, and the relationship to the old one. This is made easier because Lōk Om gets along with Broh's new family, and Srey does not remember her previous life, so

does not have the dual personalities (and desires that go alongside it) of her incarnations. However, sometimes the spirit does not visit, and it is the child that remembers their past life. This can cause conflicts, particularly if the child is born into an unknown family: some children demand to visit their previous family, and in these cases it is common for them to replicate relationships that existed in their previous incarnation<sup>131</sup>: unlike 'new' children, reincarnated children are already fully formed social beings with complete identities from their previous lives that may contradict their new place in the social hierarchy as well as in their own particular family.<sup>132</sup> New parents will often give the child medicine to help them forget their lives, fearing that the child will want to return to their previous life. Once families meet, however, and the reincarnation is accepted, they become linked in an extension of the kin networks that existed before, as is the case with Lōk Om and Broh.

We can here see how Lambek's concept of the linking between times and people works in this scenario. Whilst Srey does not remember her past life, the spirit's visit and the birthmarks she has clearly indicate her reincarnation to her parents. Cambodia's relationship with Vietnam was often hostile during the Khmer Rouge, with frequent fighting in the area, and Cambodia's relationship to Vietnam has

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<sup>131</sup> One of my informant's grandmothers has been reborn as her daughter. At age three she chose to leave her new birth family and move in with her aunt, who was, in her previous incarnation, her favourite child. Because the families live close to each other, and are direct kin, this move was allowed, because my informant also related to her daughter as her previous incarnation; 'I call her grandmother and myself 'Agn' [an informal form of 'I' used in self-address when talking to someone older or of higher social status than yourself].... We know that she's our grandmother. It's impossible to address her 'Ah meng' [a form of you used to address younger people or those of inferior social status]' she told me.

<sup>132</sup> It is this element of reincarnation that Gupta argues challenges Western understandings of children as beings-in-process: children that are incarnates of previous beings (particularly human) are 'inhabited by their (adult) thoughts and gestures' and therefore 'have to be conceptualized as more complex beings than is allowed by the standard narrative of childhood which posits a new being who slowly finds his or her way in the world' (Gupta 2002: 1).

remained fragile since the regime. The village where Lōk Om lives is only 20 kilometres from the Vietnamese border, and people often visit the border towns to trade. In addition, many Vietnamese migrant workers live and work in the rice fields of the area alongside the Khmer living there. Reincarnated from a Vietnamese boy killed close to Lōk Om's home, Srey not only offers a means of reintegrating the nameless dead into contemporary life, but also offers a mode of repairing relationships and providing a bridge between clashing nations and communities who fought viciously during the regime, but now live, work and trade together.

Broh, meanwhile, embodies several other aspects of Lambek's proposition. As both the new child, and, concurrently, Lōk Om's son, he reunites parents and child, repairing the relationship ruptured by the regime. He also reconnects the period before the regime with the present, offering a bridge between the two; and by being born into a different family, presenting a means of extending relationships and networks across different families, with the associated obligations and support systems.

### **The justice of karma and reincarnation**

The final encounter considers the way karma and reincarnation are connected in the narratives of my informants to concepts of justice. Here I am interested in justice as it is materialised through social life and embodied experiences, rather than in its judicial status. One encounter is presented in this section: Om Pich, who lost over twenty members of her family, but who despite being disabled, and being taken for 're-education' (a fate usually ending in death), survived the regime.

Om Pich was often ill, suffering from high blood pressure and the frequent bouts of dizziness that accompanied it, so she did not leave the house much. We would sit in the hammocks under her house, or on chairs in the grassy area behind it, and as I swatted the mosquitoes that constantly plagued me, she spoke about her life during and after the Khmer Rouge. She wanted me to take the stories home so people in Britain would know how terrible life had been in Cambodia: how many people had died, how much people had suffered.

Om Pich lost many members of her family during Democratic Kampuchea. She missed them daily, she told me. Her aunt, uncle and sister were killed. Both her parents died at the rural workcamp in Kampong Thom province where they were evacuated. Her brother was killed by the cadre:

My family, on my mother's side; three died. But on my father's side, there were more: seven people. All gone.

Her Aunt and Uncle's families fared even worse; the whole family was killed during the regime - fifteen in total. 'Nobody is left in those two families' she told me. However, despite the grief, Om Pich explained to me that for people to have suffered so much and experience such terrible deaths was because of their karma from previous lives. During the Khmer Rouge, she said, people were 'forced to die.' When I asked her to explain, she elaborated:

If they didn't have karma, they would not die. It must be that they committed bad deeds; that's why they were killed like this.

As we have already seen in this thesis, the Khmer Rouge were ruthless and inclusive in their killing. Om Pich's Aunt and Uncle's families were killed because

her Uncle had been a Lon Nol soldier before the regime, fighting against the Khmer Rouge guerrillas in the early 70s. Her brother was executed because he displeased one of the Khmer Rouge officers in his work group. Her parents died of starvation and fatigue; her sister of disease. But somehow, Om Pich, although disabled before the regime, survived. This was not only unusual in the context of her family, but also because of her disability: most disabled people were slaughtered by the regime, who needed fit, able people to take part in the massive projects that would construct the new Cambodia - disabled people were simply additional mouths to feed. Om Pich, however, survived and had been able to live and work throughout Democratic Kampuchea alongside other villagers from her hometown in Kandal province.

During the regime Om Pich had worked in the youth section of a massive rural workcamp. She had come close to losing her life on more than one occasion, but somehow had survived. At one stage she was imprisoned by the local cadre and taken to be 'built up' (*kāsang*). In contemporary Khmer *kāsang* literally translates as 'to build'. However, during the Khmer Rouge regime, the word took on a dual meaning where 'to build' also meant to destroy or tear down in order to start building from scratch: a kind of death and rebirth of particular institutions, or, more commonly, of individuals who were taken to '*kāsang*' (Harris 2008: 186). She described it to me:

Oh...Oun<sup>133</sup> ...that time, they captured us just because we screamed because of hunger. They called us *Neaytun Sakade Phum*<sup>134</sup>. We couldn't even say aloud

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<sup>133</sup> Oun is a term used to address those younger, or of lesser social status, than yourself.

<sup>134</sup> Village Leader's Child - a phrase used to describe children who complain a lot.

that we didn't get enough rice. I, myself, was at the Tuol Krosang dam<sup>135</sup>, oh my god, I ate six bananas the size of the toes instead of rice, and the morning glory soup was cooked sometimes with roots and small fish. We ate it just for the sake of eating. If there was a camera at that time, you'd see how thin I was. Just stepping over grass I would trip and fall. During the regime... let me tell you, so many died. Some died of sickness, some died because they complained, like: 'I wish we had this or that food' or 'I'm not full....' They would take us to build us up (*kāsang*) because they didn't want us to think of the past. It was so difficult.... But according to Buddhism, I had good karma. That's how I survived.

Om Pich considered karma to be the only adequate explanation as to why she, a disabled person, had survived whilst other, non-disabled people had died:

All of these dead people must have had bad karma in the religion. Yes, now you think about it - they were strong and physically healthy. What about me? How could I survive? I met a *Don Chee* (lay nun), a chief monk, an *âchar* (lay priest). The chief monk was disrobed and had to carry a gun. He told me so. But how come I stayed alive?

One of those who had died was her brother. After the regime, she had run into an old neighbour who had worked in his commune:

He told me 'I worked with your brother. When we finished carrying soil, he showered, and then his name was called out. They killed him.

The neighbour told Om Pich who had done the killing, that he was still alive, and told her where he lived.

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<sup>135</sup> One of the many dams built under the Khmer Rouge rule.



I thought I wanted revenge. But then I thought about the Buddhist teaching - that it was probably his bad karma from a past life, so it was like that.

Though her brother was only a young man when he was killed, his death was a consequence of actions from a previous life. Om Pich, therefore, did not need to seek revenge; his death was inevitable. Though there is an element of fatalism in this kind of thinking, it does not mean that actions in this life are meaningless and have no effect. Quite the contrary: the karmic force of evil deeds is so strong that it will potentially affect people for many lives to come and all subsequent actions are therefore important.

## Discussion

In Lambek's consideration of continuous and discontinuous people he argues that discontinuous persons (i.e. those reincarnated who are simultaneously themselves and another) present a means by which historical periods, and people within them, can be connected through retrospective and imaginary bridges between time. For Lambek, those reincarnated (or possessed by spirits) materialise the past, and therefore enable these imaginative connections to be made.

In Cambodia those reincarnated are rarely figures from the distant past (ancestors and powerful historical figures have instead become powerful *boromey* spirits who possess spirit mediums and provide them access to knowledge). Instead they are reincarnated from recent history, and rather than particular epochs, embody relationships. That said, those reincarnated are not always known to those they come to, and particularly in the case of those reincarnated from people killed

during the Khmer Rouge regime, the connection between people offered by reincarnation provides a means of reintegrating the mass dead into contemporary life.

As we saw in the cases of Da and Bong La and his sons, those who died during the regime have not been forgotten, nor do they remain nameless, despite most remaining in mass graves and never having had funeral ceremonies performed for them. Though rituals do not occur, people can be reborn: this offers hope and reassurance to many. As Erik Davis notes in his discussion of Miss Yaan's continuing lives, it is in the everyday lives of people that the cultural desiderata of order and justice is enacted (Davis 2008: 129); implicit in the reincarnation of Da's son, Bong La's children, and Bong La himself, is the desire for a new life being offered to those from whom it was torn during the regime.

Lōk Om's son Broh, meanwhile, exemplifies how reincarnation provides a means of repairing, or continuing, ruptured relationships. In addition, it enables new connections and relationships to be made amongst strangers and neighbours. Being tied through reincarnation offers potential benefits for both sides: in addition to providing comfort to the original family (through knowing who and where their loved ones have been reborn), it reinforces or extends the networks of kin and support, sometimes across vast swathes of land. As Davis notes (2008: 133):

The Cambodian family maps larger Cambodian society more flexibly than does the traditional Western family. Family boundaries appear loose, and various types of adoption, god-parenting, and other forms of 'fictive kinship' have been created.... This network of family members defines and delimits the boundaries

of the social world, the land one may safely travel, the people one may trust and upon whom one may rely, and the networks and intimacies that compose our emotional geographies, those spaces where we recognize the emotional landmarks and where we can navigate with more experience and confidence than with strangers.

Reincarnation provides one of the many modes of making connections and strengthening and extending kinship networks in the fragile post-conflict world of Cambodia. This is a vital element of providing stability in a country still fraught with difficulties and ongoing structural and direct violence by the government against its people, where trust, destroyed during the regime (when children killed parents, lovers betrayed each other, and friends became bitter enemies) remains elusive.

The relationships formed through reincarnation not only provide a continuance between the living and the dead, but also between the past and present eras. People do not end; and whilst they may have both forensic and mimetic properties of personhood (Lambek 2013), many transform into other beings. This metamorphosis, as Gupta (2002: 49) calls it, provides stability and reassurance because of the continuity allowed by the transposition of some essential qualities of the person that happens with reincarnation: a look, a way of speaking, marks on a body (as we saw with Srey and her birthmarks):

Instead of employing an idea of growth, with its corollary of teleological directionality, we need to draw upon a notion of metamorphosis or transformation. Metamorphosis emphasizes continuity and survival; it involves not the obliteration or annihilation of the self as its final stage but a transposition of some of its essential qualities. In the flux and flow of human properties across

bodily inscriptions, reincarnation stresses continuity where ideas of growth could only see discontinuity.

The different temporalities that exist within reincarnation are not only about linking people, they also link different periods: reincarnated beings are complexes of historical eras and so present continuation between those eras, most saliently, between the time before chaos descended on Cambodia in the form of civil conflict and the Khmer Rouge regime, and the more stable existence felt by many today.

This relates to Buddhist notions of the circularity of time in its widest sense, made explicit within Buddhist prophecies such as the *Put Tumneay*<sup>136</sup>. These prophecies (which some of my informants called *bunaatasaa* - 'curses') dictate an existence in continual flux between periods of prosperity and periods of devastation. Most of the prophecies are highly metaphorical, however, they are re-examined in light of what happens. A shooting star in 1969, for example, was a sign of war for an employee at the Ministry of Cult and Religion I interviewed, who also used an ancient prediction to show me how ancient Buddhist philosophers had predicted the overthrowing of Sihanouk by General Lon Nol in 1970:

A mythical bird leaves its nest, flies to catch another bird, but when a hunter comes, the bird leaves the mythical bird. Can you translate this? This prediction had existed since a long time ago. But if you think about the coup d'état in 1970, you'll see that it matched the prediction.

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<sup>136</sup> *Puth Tumneay* translates as 'The Predictions of Puth'. These are ancient predictions within Khmer Buddhism, many of which are passed between people by word of mouth. I heard several variations throughout my time in Cambodia, but the prediction most commonly related to me to explain the Khmer Rouge regime was: '*Bangkok ro'lum; Phnom Penh ro'leay; Battambang kmchat kmchay; sabbai Angkor Wat*' – 'Bangkok will collapse; Phnom Penh will be destroyed; Battambang will be scattered; happiness will return to Angkor Wat.'

Others put it more plainly. Om Pich told me ‘it had to happen.’ ‘There will always be times of death: it is the curse of Buddhism.’ These curses, however, do not affect everyone equally: there are notions of justice bound up in their interpretation that relate to karma.

The case of Om Pich and her family, particularly her brother, illustrate how karma is used to invoke notions of justice. Om Pich survived, when many others did not, because of her karma. Her family, friends, and thousands of others around her, suffered and died because of theirs. Likewise, when Lōk Om spoke of his son who had died and the daughter he now has, he pronounced their deaths to be their ‘karma’. As he, and several others told me: ‘we believe in *bon/baap*: good and evil - if you do good, you will receive good, if you do evil, you will receive evil.’ They had to die because acts in previous lives had given them ‘bad’ karma.

The notion of justice is not limited to people’s time of death. The karmic force of the acts committed (in this lifetime and previous ones) determines into which of the realms of *samsara* you will be reborn. As Hinton explains (2008: 78), Buddhism offers ‘a sort of ontological justice for the victims’ in Cambodia, providing a system of reward and punishment, regardless of how contemporary society deals with past transgressions. Justice is also played out in relation to where and when people are reincarnated. Lōk Om’s son Broh had good karma: he was therefore born to a local family close to Lōk Om. Srey likewise had good karma he told me – made evident by her progression from Vietnamese to Khmer. The karma of Da’s son, however, was not so good, so he was reborn to strangers of a lower social class than where he came from. Justice is thus materialised by

the place and time of birth, as well as within the assurance that perpetrators will suffer cosmological punishment.

Tied in with Buddhist notions of forgiveness and letting go of anger (Hinton 2008: 76), karma provides a way of accepting the millions of deaths caused by the Khmer Rouge; ultimately each individual is responsible for their own karma, in this and other lives. Adherence to this concept enables people to live in contemporary Cambodia, where Khmer Rouge perpetrators live openly in the population without seeking revenge. This can be re-assuring in a country where a culture of impunity condones violence past and present, where many ex-Khmer Rouge cadre hold positions of authority, and where it has been declared that only five perpetrators will ever be prosecuted in the UN-backed Khmer Rouge trials - a move argued to ensure the Prime Minister and other influential politicians will remain untouched (Sperling 2009: 137).

In addition, it offers an avenue of potential reconciliation for Cambodian people – knowing that their karma will ensure Khmer Rouge cadre are punished by their rebirth into the realms of *tanarout* (the underworld) or as *preta* (hungry ghosts) and understanding that people's deaths were due to their own karma, prevents people seeking revenge, as Om Pich explained. It is this certainty that led Kok Thay Eng, a senior researcher at the Documentation Center of Cambodia, a research facility whose aim is to 'help Cambodians heal the wounds of the past by documenting, researching, and sharing the history of the Khmer Rouge' (DC-Cam 2012), to use karma and reincarnation as a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation within the Khmer population, in a newspaper article published in 2010:

The enormity of the crimes committed by leaders of the Khmer Rouge could make them the worst *bret*<sup>137</sup> (lost or wandering ghosts who have committed serious sins during their lifetimes and cannot be reborn) of all, who would always be hungry and wandering without destination. If they can be forgiven by survivors, their prospect for life after death could be improved (Eng 2010).<sup>138</sup>

Some believe this is already happening. Realms of existence are not only ontological realities, but also metaphorical materialisations. An advisor at the Ministry of Cult and Religion summarised this when we met one afternoon in an office at the Buddhist University. The endemic corruption and violence in contemporary Cambodia, he told me, is due to these reincarnated Khmer Rouge stalking the country as *preta*; hungry ghosts who prey on the living:

The spirits that we believed were haunting were actually more than just haunting. They are the spirits of more than two million who died without care. These spirits came back into human bodies and caused them to kill one another, like drinking each other's blood for those spirits. Khmer [people] used to respect each other, respect their parents, respect teachers and leaders. They used to love and help each other. Now they don't love and help each other anymore. Children don't know their parents. And they fight with each other. This means they haunt each other. In the past, ghosts haunted in different ways... But now they haunt in a form of murdering, haunting by putting human being against human being. People are losing their morality. And once they lose their morality and when they are so used to seeing the killing, they follow that. They kill each other. When they see corruption, they follow it.... The law says this; they do

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<sup>137</sup> Although transcribed here as *bret*, the Khmer word for hungry ghosts is usually transcribed as *pret* or *preta*.

<sup>138</sup> It is not only for Khmer Rouge cadre that forms of incarnation provide a type of cosmic justice; some consider transgender males to have been females in a previous life who stole the husband or partner of another (Drennan 2013).

that. For example, the law doesn't allow deforestation, but they cut down the trees. The law doesn't allow murder, but they kill each other. The law doesn't allow robbery, but they rob.

The advisor was not referring to the possession of humans by malevolent spirits; he was using *preta* as both metaphor for the endemic corruption of contemporary Cambodia, and as an explanation for why it is occurring: reincarnation in Buddhism can lead to some being reincarnated as spirits, and powerful spirits can sometimes take the form of humans. *Preta* can only be released from their suffering (and Cambodia from their sinister presence) once they are reborn. For that they need to accumulate merit, something hard to do if you are a *preta*.

However, it can be done. The population has funded most of the pagodas that have been rebuilt since the demise of the regime, with the largest donations often coming from politicians or businessmen and women as a mode of merit-making. The same is true of the concrete *cheddei* (stupas for the dead) that have been built in recent years to replace the wooden *p'teah khmouch* (house of the dead) that use to contain the remains of those who died during the Khmer Rouge. Some ex-Khmer Rouge cadre have become *âchar* (lay Buddhist priests), *don chee* (nuns), or elders who live in pagodas and take care of the monks. These are all great sources of gaining merit, which can be accumulated to counteract the karma already collected. Merit is also passed to the dead at Buddhist ceremonies that occur on regular occasions. Although occasionally organised specifically for dead relatives, this form of merit making (*tvea bon*) has been incorporated into the annual ritual cycle, and primarily occurs during *Pchum Benh*, and at Khmer New Year in April, as we saw in chapter two.



## Conclusion

Judy Ledgerwood, who has spent many years working across rural Cambodia, wrote that post-Democratic Kampuchea, many Buddhist practices have become embodied acts of remembering the period before the Khmer Rouge, recreating senses of place and belonging (Ledgerwood 2008: 159). In doing so they provide comfort and stability, particularly to the elders, because they present a marker of continuance between then and now, somehow lessening the chaos that the Khmer Rouge period threw the country into:

If you ask rural Khmer about Buddhism today you are likely to get the reply that Buddhism is much the same as it was before war and revolution devastated their country. What is different today, they will say, is the morality of the people, their inability to live according to the tenets of Buddhism. This theme is consistent with a standard discourse of crisis and reformation in Buddhist history – time is cyclical with periods of glory, prosperity and long life that alternate with periods of death, destruction and despair (Ledgerwood 2008: 147).

This chapter has shown how reincarnation and karma act in the same way for the people who died during the period (and, of course, who die now). As Lambek asserts, they provide a continuity, both with the person themselves, and with the era before the wars. They offer a means of making sense of the period, and narrating it today. They enable the narration of the chaotic and terrifying period of Democratic Kampuchea, into a normalised and understandable cosmological context by which the dead can be reintegrated into society.

This is only possible because of the self-contained systems of Buddhism and animism existing in Cambodia, which whilst flexible and endlessly malleable, nevertheless, remain resistant in their enduring presence:

The Buddhist cosmos is overwhelmingly vertical and hierarchical in its logic of organization, canonic in its self knowledge, everything in its rightful place, fully continuous within itself, carefully controlling every being within itself, through itself. This cosmos is held together from within itself (Handelman and Lindquist 2011: 11).

Elements within Buddhism were able to exist throughout Democratic Kampuchea and have continued into the new Cambodia, despite the attempt at destruction of the religion. Karma and reincarnation are two such elements. Whilst rituals order the practice of Buddhism, and the *Sangha* (the monastic order of nuns and monks) organise its place within the wider society, ultimately all people continue to live in *samsara*, cycling through realms of existence, dying and being reborn in continued *dukkha* (suffering) according to their karma. Whether rituals are conducted or not, all will be reborn.

The different temporalities enabled by reincarnation provide connections and continuities: between the living and the dead, between people and places, and between historical periods. In allowing people to meet again it connects people across time and space, providing a means of extending networks of trust and kinship. The justice provided by karma provides a sense of redress and retribution, as well as a release from responsibility of survivors; with individuals being ultimately responsible for their own karma, which influences their deaths, those who survived can explain their own survival whilst others died. Karma

explains death, but also offers a mode of embodied justice; those who died did so because of their karma; those with good karma are reborn with family or friends; those with bad karma with strangers; Khmer Rouge cadre are reincarnated as *preta* or into *tanarout*, or in some extreme cases, are still waiting to be reborn.

The exploration of karma and reincarnation in this chapter allows for an exploration beyond memory, to the social incorporation of the dead into contemporary Cambodia. In its most straight-forward interpretation, reincarnation allows for continued attachment to the dead and the possibility of meeting again, and karma provides a mode by which people can understand and narrate the chaos rained down by the Khmer Rouge. Karma also provides opportunities for cosmological justice and a resistance to the pervasive political impunity in Cambodia. Reincarnation meanwhile, enables forms of reincorporative kinship that extends support networks and relationships of trust in contemporary Cambodia. Both provide imagined continuances between the periods before the regime and now, and in doing so, allow for the ruptures and disjunctures caused by the regime to be narrated in the present.

Finally the concepts of reincarnation and karma, as well as other Buddhist concepts such as the circularity of time, offer an element of stability to life in Cambodia. They do not imply that nothing changes, but that chaos and destruction, as wrought by the Khmer Rouge, are elements of Buddhist life, and as such, are both inevitable and transient. Regardless of what happens, people will continue to exist in *samsara*, moving through cycles of death and rebirth. It is that inevitability, as much as the physical reincarnation of those who lived before it, which connects the (relatively) peaceful eras before the regime and the

present: no amount of killing, no amount of ritual destruction, no amount of devastation, can prevent rebirth – ‘we are born, we die, we are born again. It’s like that’ Om Pich explained.

## Section Three: Grave Concerns

### Chapter five: Past present, present past – politics in Cambodia

The government takes out the bones to scare people:

– this was the Khmer Rouge.

- *Om Ta, on the display of remains at memorial sites.*

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While the dead are socially salient beings who interact with the living and thus affect the way they are conceived and related to, their spaces of death and burial are open to interpretation and appropriation for state and international politics, as well as individual needs. As with (most) mass graves and their memorial sites, politics renders how those from the Khmer Rouge regime are presented and experienced. In Cambodia, those that are ‘remembered’ publically are highly politicized sites central to the re-working of narratives of the regime. The selection of which sites are commemorated and which are not is a political statement, making visible the contained culpability of only a few named Khmer Rouge leaders, and thereby rendering innocent the hundreds (if not thousands) of lower grade commanders who were actually responsible for the majority of the killing, many of whom still hold positions of power in regional and local governments across Cambodia. Sites that are ‘forgotten’ meanwhile negate these simplistic narrations and provide other contested narratives to state and international narratives on the regime.

Moving on from considerations of the every day interactions and individual relationships between the living and the dead that were explored in the last section, the next three chapters all concern national political uses for the mass graves, showing how the government has commodified the dead and their graves as instruments of state politics and the building of a 'new' Cambodia – in development and the retention of power. It will do this by considering state relationships to those killed through the spaces of their graves, examining how politics controls knowledge about them (which can be known and which are forgotten), and how the graves and their dead are put to work for particular political ends through the use of specific memorial sites that display the skeletal remains of those who died.

This chapter examines the political landscape, discussing how it came into place, how successive governments have narrated the Khmer Rouge period, and the place of the graves and their dead in this. A central aspect of this is a consideration of the graves and memorials that are integral to this political manoeuvring, for which those killed are most useful as anonymous piles of dead, allowing their recognition as a mass collective rather than as individual lives lost. It will first explain contemporary Khmer politics, introducing the ruling party (the Cambodian People's Party) and their rise to power, before looking at the ways the dead and the graves have been used politically since 1979, exploring the selective memorialisation of the period, the choice and dismissal of sites in official records, and, the way the dead's 'staged bodies' (Feldman 1991: 8) are put to work as agents of violence in display of human remains.

By doing so it lays the groundwork for the next two chapters which examine specific ways in which the graves are used politically, by looking at the use of Choeung Ek for tourism as a means of economic development, political stability, and future social improvement (chapter six), and the maintenance of power through the harnessing of the spectral presence of the Khmer Rouge in political campaigning (chapter seven).

### **Politics in contemporary Cambodia**

Officially a constitutional democracy, contemporary Cambodia is, in reality, a country of authoritarian rule with a domineering Prime Minister (Hun Sen), who is not adverse to violence and extreme violation of human rights<sup>139</sup>. His party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), remains in control today through a mixture of force, intimidation, corruption, and adroit political manipulation, in which the Khmer Rouge period, its dead, and their graves, are vital. Though they have fluctuated in importance in political discourse with successive governments, being demonised during the PRK, and 'buried' in the late 1990s and early-mid 2000s (Chandler 2008), they have recently resurged as sites of political power. This resurgence most likely relates to the establishment of the the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia in 2006 (the ECCC, aka the Khmer Rouge Trials or Khmer Rouge Tribunal), at which point it became most useful for the government to re-harness the regime and its horrific violence.

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<sup>139</sup> Hun Sen has one of the worst human rights records for any 'democratic' leader. The list of violations under the CPP is extensive, including: political killings; torture; extrajudicial detention; arbitrary arrests; summary trials; censorship; bans on assembly; violent repression of protests; a national network of spies and informants used to frighten and intimidate the public into submission; the obstruction of the Khmer Rouge trials; and impunity to the endemic corruption throughout the government and civil society (Human Rights Watch 2015a).

The CPP has effectively ruled Cambodia in one form or another since the deposing of the Khmer Rouge, with the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, at its helm since 1985<sup>140</sup>. At its core are several former Khmer Rouge cadre who defected to Vietnam in 1977 and 1978, and who have formed part of every government since 1979, including the Prime Minister Hun Sen, party Chairman Heng Samrin, and the former party and Senate President, the late Chea Sim<sup>141</sup>. Following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, these defectors formed FUNSK (*Front d'Union Nationale pour le Salut du Kampuchéa* - Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation): a small party which was backed by the Vietnamese administration and put into government during the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK: 1979 – 1993) as the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party<sup>142</sup>. Following the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, the party continued to rule, changing its name to the CPP in 1991 in preparation for the 1993 UNTAC<sup>143</sup> managed elections, which were to herald the beginning of a 'fully

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<sup>140</sup> Now the sixth longest running leader of any country in the world, Human Rights Watch (2015) report that Hun Sen has been able to join 'an exclusive club of men now in power who, through politically motivated violence, control of the security forces, manipulated elections, massive corruption, and the tacit support of foreign powers, have been able to remain in power well beyond the time any leader in a genuinely democratic political system has ever served.'

<sup>141</sup> Hun Sen joined the Khmer Rouge in 1968, was a commander in the Eastern Zone during DK; foreign minister in the PRK from 1979 – 1985; and Prime Minister since then. Heng Samrin was a Khmer Rouge army division commander; Prime Minister in the PRK from 1979 – 1981; and is now President of the National Assembly and CPP Chairman. Chea Sim was a Khmer Rouge commander of Eastern Zone 20; Minister of the Interior in the PRK from 1979 – 1981; President of the National Assembly from 1981 – 1998; and President of the party from 1991, and the Senate from 1999, until his death in June 2015. Hun Sen defected in 1977, and Heng Samrin and Chea Sim in 1978 following a failed revolt by dissidents (including themselves) against Pol Pot, which led to the most bloody purges of the regime (Bartrop and Jacobs 2015). Although insufficient evidence has been found to indict Hun Sen for his actions during DK (Peou 2013), in 2006 evidence related to Heng Samrin and Chea Sim was presented to the ECCC for investigation, however, these were not pursued, allegedly due to political control of the courts by Hun Sen (Human Rights Watch 2015b).

<sup>142</sup> At this time they were the only legal party of Cambodia.

<sup>143</sup> The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UN-TAC) administered Cambodia from 1992 – 1993 and managed the 1993 elections as part of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords organized to end the conflicts in Cambodia. The peace accords mandated the disarmament of fighting factions, mine clearance, the implementation of a new democratic constitutional democracy and improved human rights among other things (USIP 2015).



realised pluralist liberal democracy' in Cambodia (Gray 2014: 56) something they categorically failed to do. Despite losing the elections, by threat of violence Hun Sen forced a coalition with the majority winners, FUNCINPEC<sup>144</sup>, before taking complete control after civil conflicts in 1997<sup>145</sup>. Since that time the CPP has won every election with a substantial majority (until 2013, see chapter seven). An employee at the Ministry of Cult and Religion summed it up for me as we chatted one afternoon:

The election organized by UNTAC was just and fair. FUNCINPEC won. But after that, in elections without international monitors, [they] never won again.

Much of the longevity of the CPP is considered to be the result of fear, intimidation, and widespread corruption: election campaigns are tinged with violence and repression, and political violence is rife, including the assassination of political rivals and critics, violent intimidation of voters, and extensive bureaucratic violence.

Central to the ruling party's discourse is a constructed narrative in which the party, with Hun Sen at the helm, emancipated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge,

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<sup>144</sup> Set up by Prince Sihanouk, FUNCINPEC stands for the *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif* - the 'National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia.' FUNCINPEC was part of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (1982 – 1993) – a government formed in exile but exerting some control over the country - that included the Khmer Rouge as well as Royalist factions.

<sup>145</sup> There is some debate as to how power was wrested from the coalition to the CPP. The press and international organisations such as Human Rights Watch contend it was a bloody coup by Hun Sen (Adams 2007; Efron 1997; Garella and Pape 2005; Human Rights Watch 2015); while others argue for a more nuanced analysis (both of the event and the value-laden term 'coup') due to the historical complexity and resulting outcomes of political stability (Kevin 1999; Ledgerwood 2010). Opposition parties, however, have used the date of this event in their political propaganda: in 2002, FUNCINPEC moved their anniversary celebrations to the date of the clashes (July 5 - 6) (although they later stopped this), and in 2014 and 2015, the main opposition party (the CNRP) held commemoration services in Phnom Penh for the event. Political commentators agree that the main purpose of such events is to remind the public of the violence and terror caused by the CPP (Meas 2014; Vong 2015).

and by which only he and his party can maintain order and peace, without which, the regime will rise once again. The dead of the Khmer Rouge, as well as the spectral presence of the regime, are central to the manipulation of Cambodia's collective narration of its liberation. This is particularly striking because of who the leaders, and a number of the CPP officials across the country, are - former cadre, many of whom held positions of rank during the Khmer Rouge regime.

While central government officials such as Hun Sen, Heng Samrin, and Chea Sim are amongst these, there are many others besides; Om Jah, who I worked with in Kep, is a particular example. Now a quiet, elderly man, he is a well-respected member of the local commune council for a small village at the foothills of Phnom Grahom. Om Jah was warm and welcoming, and was surrounded by people whenever I saw him. He lavished loving attention on his many grandchildren, and was viewed as kind and generous by the community. The village he lives in is peaceful and relatively prosperous, a factor many local people attributed to reliable and consistent leadership, including his (Hull 2013).

Throughout the Khmer Rouge regime, however, his life was very different. One of three high ranking commanders in the area, he led a cohort of cadre renowned for violence and disruption ('they used to say, 'if you want to fight, come with me to Phnom Grahom,' he told me). In the early 1970s, disillusioned with the government, and angry about the US bombing that devastated the country, he had joined the guerrilla Khmer Rouge army in the forests of Kep, and was soon promoted to captain. Although he supported their aims, it was a difficult time:

there were so many problems from bombs; weapons like I don't understand. So many ordinary people were killed, some burned, some cremated; whole families

gone. It made the people very angry with the US and the government [of Lon Nol]. People died in the forest and were eaten by animals; the smell was terrible. It was a terrible time.

Once the Khmer Rouge took control of the country, the area became home to two prisons and several killing fields, and although the cadre could descend from the forests, it remained wild and untamed. 'The forests are full of skeletons' the district chief told me when I first arrived in the area. After the demise of DK, when Vietnamese troops forced the Khmer Rouge to withdraw, many cadre, including Om Jah, went back to the forest, and it remained one of the last strongholds of the Khmer Rouge, where they survived until the late 1990s.<sup>146</sup>

Peace was finally brokered under the Win-win policy of the late 1990s. Attributed to Hun Sen, the win-win policy gave amnesty and a parallel position within the new government to Khmer Rouge commanders who laid down their arms and defected.<sup>147</sup> By the mid 1990s many cadre were tired of fighting and the constant struggle of life in the forests. In Phnom Grahom, though local villagers supported them by bringing food and medical supplies, many became sick and died. During the transitional period before the 1993 elections, UNTAC soldiers came to Kampot to try and broker peace. Although they did not enter the area (it was deemed too dangerous), several of the Khmer Rouge commanders, including Om Jah, went down to meet them.

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<sup>146</sup> The Khmer Rouge retained control of some areas in Kep and Anlong Veng, and frequently raided villages across the country for supplies. They also ran some of the refugee camps at the Thai-Cambodian border, funding their existence through gem and timber smuggling, and via assistance from China and Thailand (Lischer 2006; Pear 1988).

<sup>147</sup> This was not the first instance of amnesty being offered. In 1979, in partnership with the 'show trail' of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, immunity was offered by the Vietnamese to any former Khmer Rouge members willing to work against Democratic Kampuchea (Heder and Tittimore 2001: 7).

This was the beginning of the peace process for Phnom Grahom. These initial talks opened the possibility of official negotiations between the government and the Khmer Rouge.<sup>148</sup> ‘The Khmer Rouge were like bamboo’ Om Jah explained: ‘to bend it you need to do it little by little.’ Once the possibility of compromise was conceded, and the Khmer Rouge officers in agreement, defection became a conceivable future that took little time to enable.

Although a controversial policy, because of the impunity it gave to former Khmer Rouge, the win-win policy is, arguably, the only way peace could have been made in Cambodia at the time; it was the only way high-ranking Khmer Rouge officials such as Khieu Samphan (Head of State for the Khmer Rouge) and Nuon Chea (Brother Number Two) could make peace without losing face<sup>149</sup>, and this, alongside its critical timing (when most cadre were weary of fighting, but needed a way to be able to lay down arms), made it remarkably successful (Hull 2013). Hun Sen and the CPP have taken this success and turned it into a central narrative supporting their current position as leaders of the country. They have combined it with their presence in the initial Vietnamese-backed government of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia to create a narrative that they saved Cambodia, and that only they can maintain peace and prevent the Khmer Rouge rising again (see chapter seven).

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<sup>148</sup> Although officially on opposite sides, the government and Khmer Rouge soldiers in Phnom Grahom had been working together for years. It was the government soldiers who told the Khmer Rouge when a train was coming, and they shared the spoils after each ambush. ‘It was like a game,’ a former cadre in the area commented: ‘we fought in the day and drank together at night.’

<sup>149</sup> In August 2014 Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea both received life sentences for Crimes Against Humanity in Case 002 of the ECCC. Their indictments in 2007 caused some resentment and nervousness amongst former cadre – Om Jah told me that many people felt angry about this, not because they did not feel like they had committed terrible crimes, or that Cambodia needed some form of justice, but because they had been promised impunity when they defected. He felt Hun Sen had gone back on his word, which was making some ex-cadre nervous while I was there. Because of this, whenever I worked with ex-cadre, I had to be sure to emphasise the anonymity of my research.

However, this renewed interest in the regime is relatively recent, and an example of the fluctuating discourses and narratives regarding that time, something illustrated by the treatment of remains, and the fluctuating privileging and selective memorialisation of the graves and the dead.

### **Raising the dead: political uses of the dead and their graves**

As we have already seen, while many local people looted the graves for valuables, the initial attention paid to the mass graves by the state was as evidence of atrocity as a mode of political legitimisation<sup>150</sup>. As we have already seen, the Vietnamese backed government of the PRK exploited any evidence that could be used to support their rule and embed their narratives of power. The Khmer Rouge were demonised Rouge, labelled as ‘genocidal’ and ‘facist’ to encourage comparisons with Hitler’s Germany and to downplay DK’s socialist credentials’ (Chandler 2008a: 360). Democratic Kampuchea became known as ‘*samay a Pot*’ - the time of Pol Pot, and the blame for all its crimes laid at the feet of ‘the genocidal clique of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan.’ The dead and their graves became central components in this.

There was no shortage of physical evidence. Democratic Kampuchea did not hide the damage it wrought. The population was emaciated, starving, and rife with disease. The dead littered the landscape. Within days of being located, Tuol Sleng prison was turned into a museum for foreign journalists and visiting dignitaries (Chandler 2008c; Tyner 2012a). Although it was not officially turned into a museum

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<sup>150</sup> It is common for mass graves to be exploited in such ways when new governments take over from previously brutal regimes. They offer a means of differentiating themselves from the old regime and securing their status as saviours of their nation; this can be seen regularly in the media, most recently in Syria, Libya and Iraq (Al-Jazeera 2011; BBC 2012; Crossley 2014; Hassin 2011; Mezzofiore 2015).

until 1988, in 1980 guards were put at Choeung Ek, and officials brought foreign visitors to the site several times a year. Other graves and their dead became part of this legitimization: Anne Guillou reports that following the Vietnamese invasion, many local communes were ordered to collect bodies from the local fields and re-house them in village memorial stupas (Guillou 2012a, 2012b). In many areas graves were not excavated for this. They did not need to be; there were enough bones scattered across the surface of Cambodia and it was easy to collect thousands of remains from these. Two elderly âchar (lay priests) from a village across the river from Koh Sop, Bu Muoy and Bu Bpii, had been involved in this collection:

[Bu Muoy]: At that time, the bones were scattered all over the place. That's why they asked people to go there to collect the bones. They were scattered all over the place; some were near the pits and some were near the forest. So we collected them.

[Bu Bpii]: The bones were collected to put in different pagodas: this pagoda, that pagoda...

[Bu Muoy]: The bones were collected. When it was new [immediately after liberation] the bones were scattered all over the place and some had the flesh attached to them. Then the flesh got rotten and the bones were all over the place, and we went to collect the bones to keep in one place. That was during PRK after the liberation of Democratic Kampuchea.

**When you went to collect the bones, were the bones on the top [the surface]?**

[Bu Muoy]: Yes, they were on the top.

[Bu Bpii]: Yes, they were not buried.

In 1982 the PRK issued a decree ordering that the physical evidence of ‘the genocidal clique of Pol Pot, Ieng Sery and Khieu Samphan’ should be preserved. These decrees and orders have been taken as evidence that this is why the graves were exhumed; Fawthrop and Jarvis (2004: 217) state that ‘graves were excavated by the Cambodian government in the early 1980s....’ and Craig Etcheson (2005: 125) notes that a ‘significant proportion of the mass graves has been exhumed over the years by Cambodian government authorities....’ Certainly the dead were exploited for this purpose, although whether the majority were first excavated by government decree, or by locals looting them for valuables is debatable: the bodies at all the sites I visited during my research (sixteen locations across seven provinces), except Choeung Ek, were initially unearthed as the result of local interventions - people looting the graves for valuables. These unearthed dead were then collected to display in *p’teah khmouch* (built under the orders of the government) alongside those who had laid on the surface.<sup>151</sup> Fawthrop and Jarvis note that Min Khin, one of the eight people forming the People’s Revolutionary Council of Kampuchea which functioned as the cabinet until 1981, recalls sending a directive out ‘through the governmental apparatus to village level asking the people not to touch the remaining physical or documentary evidence’ of the regime (2004: 41). This directive was an attempt to try and stop the deletion of the regime’s material presence in the form of buildings, which were torn down (usually for materials but sometimes out of anger) as well as mass graves, which were being looted.

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<sup>151</sup> DC-Cam’s mapping data supports this hypothesis. Of the 47 cases where the excavation method is recorded, only nine report being ordered by government decree. 35 were reported as being dug up by people searching for valuables, one by family members looking for relatives (this was rare), and the other three are not made clear. Fawthrop and Jarvis (2004), Etcheson (2005), and DC-Cam (2005) all acknowledge the actions of those searching for valuables in the graves; however, they are not attributed to being responsible for exhuming the bodies, or of being the initial motivators for opening the graves in many locations, as people often told me.

## Memorialising violence, forgetting names

Whichever the case, the remains became important evidence of mass violence and useful political tools; across the country the bones were collected, cleaned, left to dry, and eventually displayed in the wooden *p'teah khmouch* built in each district under government orders. These came to serve as memorials of the regime; DC-Cam records over eighty of these huts serving as 'local'<sup>152</sup> memorials, with Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek functioning as national ones. Memorials<sup>153</sup> provide ideal sites for the embedding of national constructions of historical narratives; war memorials in particular are sites at which the nation is constructed and reified (Mosse 1991), because, as Jenny Edkins (2003: 16 – 17) asserts in her book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 'in the most part, memorialisation of war is a practice that reproduces stories of national glory and heroism. It produces linear time, the time of the state [which] can inscribe the national myth or the imagined community.'<sup>154</sup> This works particularly well in the case of 'event-centred frames for memory' (such as the Khmer Rouge regime) because these are 'amenable to narrative and dramaturgical modes of representation' (White 2006: 293). In such a case, the memorialised event or people become a symbol of

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<sup>152</sup> The reference to these memorials as 'local' memorials is somewhat misleading, implying that these were initiated by lay people, not that they were a means of displaying the consequences of the regime across the nation, thus embedding its violent reminders no matter how far from Phnom Penh you are.

<sup>153</sup> I use memorials to refer to monuments built or preserved to commemorate events of the past. Events can also be memorialised, of course through literature, art, dance, theatre and other performances. Thompson (2013) provides an excellent exploration of memorialisation through art in Cambodia, highlighting the tension between artistic expression and consumption and national constructions of 'truths' about the Khmer Rouge, managed through the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which controls a monopoly on knowledge and memory in contemporary Cambodia.

<sup>154</sup> Her book illustrates, however, that although often separated, personal mourning and the imposition of national myth are not necessarily opposed, using, as an example, the part Holocaust memorials and commemorations in Israel have played in the construction of a narrative that supports the militarisation of the state.



solidarity via an emotional presentation of history that is a powerful enabler of national subjectivity by rendering 'the context of violence one of national suffering and sacrifice' (ibid: 296), and thereby presenting the subjects of the memorial as the embodiment of national identity.<sup>155</sup>

These representations enable unified, politically salient stories to be presented ('rehearsed memories' as Caroline Winter (2009) labels them in her examination of social memory of WW1 in Australia), and through their presentation in this form, these narratives become reiterated in both national and international collective memory and fixed as static historical presentations. This is arguably the case in Cambodia, where its turbulent history has been consolidated in popular international discourse into one event: destruction by the Khmer Rouge. This has partly been achieved through the amalgamation of nameless dead into state memorials, where they have come to represent Cambodians who suffered, not at the hands of hundreds, possibly even thousands, of their countrymen, but by a select few 'evil' Khmer Rouge. James Holt (2012) argues that the PRK memorials directed state sponsored narratives that put the dead to work in the name of the newly constructed state, telling a story of liberation and freedom that arguably the PRK regime did not fully epitomise; while allowing people to return home and begin farming and working again, the PRK still strictly controlled Cambodia, restricting people's movement and controlling religion and land ownership. Violence was still rife, extrajudicial imprisonments common, and hundreds of

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<sup>155</sup> The premier example of this is 9/11 memorialisations, where the 'great sacrifices' of the dead are used to justify devastating military interventions across the globe. A more recent example is the shooting of holidaymakers in Tunisia, which has been manipulated by the government to exhibit the dead as martyrs in the 'war' against terrorism.

thousands of people died, from disease and starvation in the initial years, and from the K5 plan<sup>156</sup> in the latter (Slocomb 2004).

While the PRK emphasised the genocidal actions of Democratic Kampuchea, following Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and a move towards democratic rule in the State of Cambodia (1989 – 1993), during the 1990s 'amnesia [became] the order of the day' (Chandler 2008a: 363). As peace was brokered between the ongoing fighting factions, widespread impunity for Khmer Rouge cadre and their collaborators became the norm, and ranking cadre were enfolded into the ranks of the government (the aforementioned win-win policy). Though Chandler discusses this amnesia in relation to Cambodian politics in the 1990s, an international amnesia preceded this. The 1991 Paris Peace Accords<sup>157</sup>, drawn up in an attempt to end the ongoing conflict in Cambodia, not only insisted that the Khmer Rouge be included in the interim government of Cambodia (which the CPP resisted), but also ensured any mention of killings, torture, or other suffering endured under the Khmer Rouge was omitted from the international lexicon and the word 'genocide' removed from discussions, instead referring to 'the policies and practices of the past' (Chandler 2008: 364). Partly this was related to the 1993 elections (international advisors considered that elections could not be free and fair if one party was able to accuse the other of genocide),

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<sup>156</sup> Also known as the Bamboo Curtain, the K5 plan ran from 1984 – 1989 and was an attempt by the PRK to cut off Khmer Rouge access to Cambodia. Up to one million people (mostly men) were forcibly conscripted to this programme (Human Rights Watch 2015a) in which thousands of acres of forest were felled, wire fences erected, trenches dug, and somewhere between 4 and 25 million mines laid along almost the entire 750 kilometre border - the difference lies between official and unofficial receipts of munitions at the time; a military veteran reported that for every official shipment recorded, 6 or 7 unofficial shipments also arrived (Roberts 2011). Thousands of people died from malaria (Gottesman (2003) estimates up to 25,000 although it could well be more) and the mines maimed or killed many thousands more, and remain a threat today.

<sup>157</sup> Signed by the State of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer People's Liberation Front, and FUNCINPEC.

but it also resulted from Cold war politics: around the globe Vietnam's intervention in the country in 1979 was seen as an aggressive act of invasion, and its ongoing presence in the country throughout the 1980s as illegal occupation (Martini 2007). As a result the Khmer Rouge (in coalition with two other small parties) held the UN seat for Cambodia until 1993, when it was conceded following the elections.<sup>158</sup>

As Hun Sen's rule became embedded without the internationally frowned upon Vietnamese assistance, and as more and more cadre defected to the government, the Khmer Rouge regime became weaker and weaker. As the CPP tried to broker peace with those remaining, highlighting the evidence of the atrocities committed during Democratic Kampuchea became ill advised, as did singling out Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea as leaders of a genocidal regime (this is the amnesia Chandler refers to). At this time, all responsibility for the crimes of the regime was laid at the feet of Pol Pot and a few loyal followers such as Ta Mok<sup>159</sup>. Although Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek continued to be important, the *p'teah khmouch* that stood across the country became less politically important; as time went on they were neglected and many fell into disrepair. Remains decayed, animals ate or trampled on the bones, and in some areas floods and bad weather destroyed what remained. Local people had only ever maintained them under government orders, and with central control being (violently) assured, these forms of evidence became less important. Anne Yvonne Guillou (2012a; 2012b)

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<sup>158</sup> Not, sadly, in relation to the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge, which had long been known by the international community.

<sup>159</sup> Ta Mok (nicknamed the butcher because of his reputation for brutality) was a leading Khmer Rouge commander, and according to Hinton (2006) one of the key architects of the Khmer Rouge genocide. In 1977 he became chief of the Khmer Rouge army and oversaw all internal purges of the regime. Ta Mok was the only Khmer Rouge official, except Pol Pot, to refuse to defect to the CPP. In 1999 he was arrested and charged with genocide and crimes against humanity; he died in prison in 2006 (ibid.).

and Rachel Hughes (2005) report that this neglect was a result of disinterest from local people, who saw no use for these memorials, and for whom they bear little resonance.<sup>160</sup>

The defections by the Khmer Rouge continued throughout the 1990s, until 1998, when Nuon Chea (Brother Number Two) and Khieu Samphan (President of Democratic Kampuchea) came over to the government. The government's mode for dealing with the regime at this point became burial. At the press conference that welcomed the two over to the government, Hun Sen entreated people to 'dig a hole and bury the past' (Chandler 2008: 356). Teaching about the regime, which had been stopped in the run up to the 1993 elections (because of its insistence on genocide) remained absent from the school curriculum.<sup>161</sup> However, the devastation caused by the regime could not be completely dismissed, and after decades of negotiation, in the early 2000s, the possibility of a Khmer Rouge tribunal<sup>162</sup> became inevitable, and interest in the regime and its history resurged.

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<sup>160</sup> Guillou argues that the rural population of Cambodia have their own methods of commemorating the dead which, rather than being chronological and related to particular sites, works in a 'switch on, switch off' fashion, where the dead interject into the lives of the living in some periods, and at other times are forgotten as everyday life progressed. This is most likely true regarding their use as memorials, however, as we saw in chapter two, these *p'teah khmouch* were not, according to my informants, completely alien or unnecessary but provided a place for the dead to be brought in from the forest, and be housed appropriately, while their care was managed spiritually by their families.

<sup>161</sup> Bong La told me he had never learnt about the Khmer Rouge at school, and although his parents had told him some stories, most of what he knows he taught himself when he became a tour guide at Choeung Ek. 'Actually, now I know more than my parents about it, even though they lived through the regime,' he told me, 'because I work here, and every day I learn more and more.'

<sup>162</sup> Fawthrop and Jarvis (2004) provide a good summary of the ups and downs of getting the tribunal started. Readers should be aware, however, of the heavy bias in this book towards Hun Sen and the CPP.

## Resurging interest: the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia

Following their complete seizure of power in 1997, the CPP sought to limit its symbols of legitimation to certain sites (primarily Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek), but as interest in the regime resurfaced in the early 2000s, given his, and many of the CPP members' pasts, the history still needed managing, and Hun Sen once again sought control of the remains. In December 2001, shortly before legislation was signed off on the creation of the ECCC, Hun Sen issued the following directive (RGC 2001, my highlights):

Following the liberation of 7 January 1979, numerous graves were left behind throughout the entire territory of Cambodia as physical testimony of the crimes committed against the innocent Cambodian people by the ***genocidal Pol Pot regime***. Right away, the authorities and citizens made efforts to take the remains of victims and to preserve them carefully, some in stupas, and some in other forms of appropriate memorial. However, the government has observed that since that time, these memorials have not been properly maintained.

In order to preserve the remains as evidence of the historic crimes ... all local authorities at province and municipal level shall cooperate with relevant expert institutions in their areas to examine, restore and maintain existing memorials, and to examine and research other remaining gravesites, so that all such places may be transformed into memorials....<sup>163</sup>

This directive makes it clear that the person now blamed for the crimes committed was singular: Pol Pot (in contrast to during the PRK, when it had been

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<sup>163</sup> This directive also ordered the preparation for tourism of Anlong Veng, the base of the Khmer Rouge leadership, and burial site of Pol Pot's cremains.

Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan) further obfuscating the names and numbers of others involved, the wider geo-political circumstances that led to the regime, and the ongoing violence that brought the current government to rule.

At around this same time, skeletal remains started to move around the country from the rural *p'teah khmouch* to concrete *cheddei* (stupa) within particular pagoda sites. A District Chief in Kandal province told me that the reason given for movement was to make things easier for the relatives to visit, but in practice most were moved under government directives of the early 2000s so that each provincial memorial would have more remains. At Koh Sop, the remains were split between three pagodas<sup>164</sup>, however, the majority of the remains went to a pagoda complex within a hundred metres of the Commune Office and close to the District and Provincial Offices. In Kep, remains were moved from several locations to Wat Kampong Tralach, again the pagoda most closely associated with the local district and provincial office. In Battambang it was to Wat Samrong Knong. The sites they moved to were not only selected for their geographical location or political affiliation. Most had also been killing and mass gravesites. The essence of Khmer Rouge killing therefore, remains in these spaces. It is at these central pagodas that many political events now occur; for the ruling party; for the opposition; and for other organisations and individuals wishing to make visible perceived violences in the world (see chapter seven).

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<sup>164</sup> Although driven by the government, these movements were not unwelcomed by those running the pagodas and some actively sought the remains; one monk told me that ceremonies are the main means pagodas have to raise funds, and because memorial ceremonies for the dead of the Khmer Rouge only occur where there are remains, some pagodas took bones from local *p'teah khmouch* in order to encourage people to visit during *Pchum Benh* and New Year, during which time they would provide generous donations to the pagoda.

Contemporaneously the annual remembrance ceremony for the regime, The Day of Anger, was revived at these centralised sites. In 1984, commemorating the date in 1976 that the Khmer Rouge first instigated collectivization, the PRK nominated May 20th as *T'veer Chong Kamhaeng*: the Day of Tying Anger (or the Day of Maintaining Rage (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2004: 73)). On this day, ceremonial events were held across the country, usually at pagodas or other public spaces such as schools. These events served two purposes: legitimising the new PRK regime, and keeping the hatred alive against the Khmer Rouge, who still posed a threat across much of Cambodia. 'We made statues of Pol Pot and threw stones at them and destroyed them. They taught the children that action' Bong La told me. Hatred at these events was not only aimed at the regime, but because of their continued support of the Khmer Rouge, also directed towards the US and China, both of whom bear some responsibility for the rise and success of the Khmer Rouge (Kiernan 2004), both of which enforced a trade embargo on Cambodia following its liberation by the Vietnamese in 1979 (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2004), and both of which (alongside most other powers) opposed bringing the Khmer Rouge to justice, and ensured their retention of the UN seat for Cambodia until 1993 (Marks 1994).

*T'veer Chong Kamhaeng* was suspended during the UNTAC period (1992 – 1993), but in 2001 the CPP revived the event, renaming it *T'ngai Romluk* (Day of Remembrance). Prior to the movement of remains to centralised sites, 'any place that had 'witnessed' killing, torture, burial or forced labour during the Democratic Kampuchea period (1975-1979) was considered an appropriated place for the May 20<sup>th</sup> commemoration' (Hughes 2000: 40). Now however, it occurs only at these centralised sites. Its revival serves an equally useful political function as its

creation during the PRK, helping solidify narratives related to the party's liberation of Cambodia's from the Khmer Rouge, whilst simultaneously reminding the population of the terror and violence the regime engendered. At most pagodas, the event is understated and although mostly government employees attending, some local people do too. At Choeung Ek, however, the event is much more formalized, and the central element is a graphic re-enactment of the brutality of the regime and its eventual demise at the hands of the CPP (see chapter seven).

Not only has this event been revived. As part of the proposed reparations by the ECCC, five new memorials will be created.<sup>165</sup> These memorials will be at sites that can be directly linked to the five perpetrators tried by the ECCC: Kaing Guev Eav (Comrade Duch); Noun Chea; Ieng Sary; Khieu Samphan and Ieng Thirith. James Tyner (2014) argues that this selective memorialisation functions in the same way James Holt (2012) argued Vietnamese memorialisation did: as a means of controlling the historical narratives and setting the CPP apart from the Khmer Rouge as perpetrators of national violence, in order to consolidate their position as patrons of Cambodia. The first memorial was inaugurated at Tuol Sleng in February 2015. Its planning took much time, and caused much controversy because amongst the recommendations were the listing of the names of 'victims' tortured at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. The controversy arose not only because naming people on a memorial is not a Khmer tradition, and was viewed as a foreign imposition by the international advisors (McPherson 2014), but also because as the only site naming the dead, it would be mostly Khmer Rouge cadre

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<sup>165</sup> Almost all conceived of by international advisors and Phnom Penh based NGOs funded by international funding. In 2012 I attended one of the meetings held by the ECCC's Victim Support Service discussing what kind of reparations should be given. The meeting was held in the InterContinental hotel in Phnom Penh, and of the 20+ people attending the meeting, only two or three were Khmer, all employed in Phnom Penh based organisations.



who became memorialized, thus inscribing their names as victims of Khmer history whilst all others remain nameless and therefore deleted from the record.<sup>166</sup>

In addition, a new wave of 'local' memorials have been recently constructed by a Phnom Penh based NGO, funded with foreign money. These memorials (hidden away at the back of the sites they memorialise) do not mention the dead. Instead they represent the Khmer Rouge. They are statues of Khmer Rouge soldiers (as in Wat Ek Phnom in Battambang province); depictions of slave labour in the rice fields (as in Kapmot Province); paintings of the regime (as in Kraing Ta Chan in Takeo Province). These memorials are much more about remembering violence than they are commemorating the dead, a line much favoured by the ruling party, which uses this to its political and social advantage.

### **Hierarchies of death in the written record**

It is not only the location of memorials and events occurring that control memory this way. The listing of mass graves also affects the sites that are recorded in history and those which are forgotten, excluding those which do not suit the political rhetoric of one guilty leader, with a handful of loyal followers, and an otherwise benign and maligned following.

Much of the information currently existing on the mass graves in Cambodia comes from a ten year mass grave mapping project undertaken by the Cambodian Genocide Project at Yale University, in partnership with DC-Cam. This project

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<sup>166</sup> Interestingly, the memorial, like much of the memory-work being done in Cambodia, was funded through the Germany aid agency GIZ. Much of the memory-work replicates that done in Germany following the Holocaust. Its appropriateness for Cambodia, and Germany's place as patrons of remembering, is, perhaps, an interesting topic for further research.

attempted to 'map the genocide' by mapping the security centres and killing field sites across Cambodia, and putting some figures on the scale of the killings by recording estimated numbers of bodies contained within graves at these sites. Although the mapping project has major flaws (see introduction, footnote 13), it is the only such attempt that has been undertaken and is therefore the starting point of any research on mass graves in Cambodia. Indeed, it is from their list that I discovered many of the sites that I visited in Cambodia<sup>167</sup>.

The inclusions and exclusions in this mapping, however, provide a skewed view of the mass grave distribution and contents, which is further controlled via the national memorialisation. Omitted from the list are graves created before 1975 or after 1979<sup>168</sup>, graves from known (or suspected) hospitals and field clinics, sites where the researchers felt they could not estimate a figure (even if several witnesses and now court proceedings reported the presence of graves, such as in the areas surrounding Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh), and sites composing of single graves, even where hundreds or thousands of single graves resulted from the policies of the regime rendering them sites of killing and death (see introduction).

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<sup>167</sup> This list caused some people to view me with suspicion upon first meeting me: asking me who had given it to me and what did I need it for?

<sup>168</sup> Although the Khmer Rouge only ruled Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, as mentioned in chapter one, they had control over some areas of Cambodia in the early 1970s, and had already started their system of security centres before they came to power. Despite finding evidence for several graves from pre-1975, only one appears on DC-Cam's list: M-13, a prison facility in Thpong district of Kampong Speu province. M-13 was where Kaing Guek Eav (Comrade Duch) perfected his craft of extracting confessions through torture. As the data for the mapping project was being collected, it was already clear that Duch (who had been in prison since giving himself up in 1999) would potentially be the trial case for the ECCC, and evidence from M-13 was important in his conviction. In addition, although the terrible years of Democratic Kampuchea were the most brutal, the decades between 1960 and 2000 saw massive periods of civil unrest, during which many people lost their lives. Although occurring in periods where traditional funeral rituals were enabled, some of these bodies are buried in mass graves: Ta Veng district in Ratanakiri province, for example, has at least two communal graves for those who died as a result of the US bombing (DC-Cam 2000), and an informant who had been in K5 told me this occurred elsewhere, particularly in those areas heavily affected by the bombings and other civil unrest.

Researchers did not visit some areas (such as the heavily forested areas of Ratanakiri, or areas where the Khmer Rouge were still at large, such as the border regions of Thailand), graves in other countries (such as Vietnam), or those of contemporary political interest<sup>169</sup>. It is not even that such graves appear listed elsewhere; they are simply rendered invisible (and therefore non-existent) through their exclusion.

Omissions to its list of graves constructs a hierarchy of the dead: only those who were executed during April 1975 – January 1979, and those who lie at sites not considered politically challenging have become worthy of recording, and therefore remembered as ‘victims’ of the regime. This parallels the reduction of those responsible for the deaths and destruction, both offering a politically controlled narrative of blame, as well as of violent death and genocide.

### **Violent bodies and affective remains**

This final section will use Feldman’s (1991) argument that the body injured in terror becomes itself an agent of that terror, to give specific consideration to the display of human remains across Cambodia. These displays, alongside the control of information and narratives of the regime, exemplify how the Cambodian

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<sup>169</sup> Kampong Chhnang airport is one such example. Only a few kilometers from the provincial capital, the airport is easily accessed down well-built concrete roads. The site stands neglected, with one or two guards looking over it. Up to 10,000 people worked on the site at the peak of its construction, and many more passed through. Nearly all were RAK (Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea) soldiers – men and women from inside DK ranks accused of being traitors (ECCC 2015b). Hundreds, if not thousands, of people died through exhaustion and others disappeared in the evenings. Although many were moved to other sites to be executed, those I spoke to who lived on the approach road to the airport, and a guard who had been working at the site since 1979, told me that when they returned in 1979 the surrounding fields were full of bodies and the air around the site was fetid. DC-Cam never deployed a research team to this highly accessible site, not even after it became a site of significant interest in case 002 and 003 at the ECCC. In 2012, it was announced that to divert some of the traffic from Pochentong in Phnom Penh, the airport will be expanded to become Cambodia’s second major international airport.

government is manipulating the inherent symbolic power of dead bodies to further their political aims. As we have seen, it is the materiality of dead bodies that is central to their efficacy as symbols because, as Verdery (1999: 28) asserts, they are made meaningful through 'culturally established relations to death and through the way a specific dead person's importance is (variously) construed.' The dead of the Khmer Rouge are powerful not because of *who* they are, but because of *what* they: anonymous piles of skeletal remains that because of their past are both emblematic and agents of the violence that created them.

Hun Sen has often stated that the remains of those killed during Democratic Kampuchea will not be cremated because they remain the only evidence of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>170</sup> My informants felt the same. Chan, a teacher who lives behind Choeung Ek and uses it as a site of education for her pupils told me that in her opinion, the remains should be kept for as long as they could:

they should be kept as evidence for the younger Khmer generation to show them it was real: that there was the Khmer Rouge, that Khmer killed Khmer. It was not a legend. Because sometimes elderly do lie to us, for instance, they would tell us to eat the fishes fin, so that we could swim, and eat the end of sugarcane so that we could swim as well. Actually those things were not tasty, they just wanted us to eat them. If we just told people through word of mouth, they would not

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<sup>170</sup> This preservation was a site of contestation between him and Sihanouk when he was alive who wanted the remains to be cremated. Om Jah was convinced he wanted to destroy the evidence of the regime, which he, and many others, held Sihanouk responsible for: 'it was him who called us to the forests' he told me (a widely accepted view: Ben Kiernan, a historian who has undertaken extensive research into the regime's rise to power, argues that without Sihanouk's support, the Khmer Rouge are unlikely to have received the level of support they needed to take Cambodia in 1975 (Kiernan 2004). Philip Gourevitch (2012) put it more prosaically: 'His name became the Khmer Rouge's greatest recruitment tool, and the most extreme Communist movement in history swept to power on royal coattails.' Hun Sen, meanwhile, has so persuasively re-worked the historical narratives, that even this works in his favour: as the one who wants to keep the remains he presents himself as one who cannot bear for the horrors of the past to be forgotten and will defend its attempted deletion, whilst at the same time controlling narratives to suit his own ends.

remember. Here they can see the truth, because the bones are piled up. When I came here, I realised, even though I was not born in that era, this event obviously happened in Khmer Society... Khmer killed Khmer.

It was a common trope that without the skeletal remains it would be harder for people, especially younger generations who had not lived through the regime, to believe that it had happened.<sup>171</sup> One of the directors at Choeung Ek felt it important to be open about the past, because only then would younger people believe the veracity of the tales told to them.

this is a true story. We can't hide a true story. We shouldn't hide it from the next generation at all. We should keep all true stories, whether good or bad, as evidence for the next generation so they can use it. Let us show both good and bad from the past so that it is known what the reasons were and its consequences. So definitely, we must know the truth from the past. The next generation must know. We must not hide. Yes, we must not hide. So we must keep everything for them to see, because everything is true. It is not fake. It is true.

It was not just about educating the young. Foreigners would also be better convinced, I was told, if they could see piles of human remains.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Some of my younger informants also told me that the Khmer Rouge is like a bogey-man to many: it is used by some parents as a threat to encourage good behaviour, in the mode of 'if you had refused your food during the Pol Pots, you would have been killed'. This, along with the lack of education about the regime, encourages a mythification of the Khmer Rouge.

<sup>172</sup> The need for foreigners in particular to see this physical evidence was explained to me one day by an old man I was interviewing. He was adamant that if the international community had known what was happening they would have come to their aid. He was shocked, and I felt the inherited guilt, when I told him that they had been aware, but had chosen not to intervene.

One could assume that the evidence they refer to is for the ongoing Khmer Rouge trial. Human remains have been central to other war crime tribunals such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). However, no skeletal remains have been used in the ECCC. No forensic experts have been called to examine either the corporeal remains or any grave sites (Jarvis 2013).<sup>173</sup> Rather, the evidence referred to is to prove the existence of the Khmer Rouge regime and for the government to reify the CPP's narrative that they saved Cambodia and only they can keep it from safe from a resurgence of the regime (see chapter seven).

Of course this is not the case: there is plenty of other evidence of the horrors of the regime and its devastating effect. However, skeletal remains hold a claim to authenticity that few other artefacts can approach and therefore provide compelling evidence. As Renshaw (2011: 32) explains, in her examination of mass graves from the Franco regime in Spain:

The dead body as witness holds a power that little else can match because of its authenticity; the materiality of dead bodies 'enable representations of the past to be made without apparent authorship or mediation.

As such they often hold precedence over other artefacts and testimony; in cases of abuses of human rights they have become one of the only forms of evidence

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<sup>173</sup> As a forensic anthropologist it was clear to me that the reason for this was that because of the Khmer Rouge killing mechanisms the majority of the remains will bear little or no skeletal trauma that would be useful as evidence. Additionally, the remains were excavated so long ago, and many have been moved around, that it is impossible for their provenance to be proven; all a massive pile of bones proves is a massive pile of dead – where and when these came from is difficult to determine unless forensic protocols are followed from the first day of investigation. Most of the mass graves, meanwhile, have long ago been re-appropriated into everyday living space. Remains within them are likely to have been destroyed from years of farming: they have been human fertilizer for many years now. As such it would be difficult to locate a grave with enough integrity to be usefully excavated for evidence.

that is trusted. The authority of bodies is one that no other document or artefact can claim: they once were people. We too have skeletons, and this could be us. The human remains displayed throughout Cambodia, therefore, have symbolic credibility, despite the human mediation that has gone into their arrangement and display. Though curated objects, these bodies appear not to be 'histories after-images' (Young 2000: 3); they are not simply representations of the event left behind that must be mediated in order to present a particular narrative (at least in the viewer's eyes when seeing them); they ARE the history: they are the dead and therefore the real story. However, they are also exhibition artefacts, collated and curated in order to "preserve' the past' (Hoskins 2003: 13). The corporeal remains therefore materialize the Khmer Rouge period in a way no other artefact could.<sup>174</sup>

However, as Sara Guyer (2009: 159) argues in her discussion of memorial sites in Rwanda, all bodies make bones, and those displayed at Choeung Ek and other sites across the country could be any dead. To display the remains in such a way - piled on top of each other, arranged by skeletal element rather than individual people; dirty; dusty; disorganised – enables their use not as a representation of individuals lost, but instead a collective: those who died:

to remember the dead through the sheer anonymity of these bones means that no one is or can be remembered. A pile of unrelated bones or a shelf with rows of carefully arranged skulls does not commemorate a person.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> So disregarded is other evidence, that when the school head master on Koh Sop discovered shackles and other items left over from the Khmer Rouge prison near his home, he threw them in the river. 'They're not useful for anyone' he told me.

<sup>175</sup> Guyer argues that such displays represent a dehumanisation of those killed, and by doing so engenders a further political violence on those displayed. A similar argument has been made for

The collective identity rendered by their un-named status enables their use as objects of constructed narratives. As Guyer states (2009: 172), such monuments serve not as reminders of what happened, but as lessons of what we must see: 'what [such displays] shows us is not the holocaust as we might remember it, but rather the Holocaust as we must learn to see it for the first time.' Genocide renders a group of people as one: one that can be deleted from life. These anonymous displays do the same in the present: these bones, these seemingly unreal bones, render the remains as one: 'even as the memorial preserves individual bodies, it turns these bodies into mere parts of a single anonymous form' (ibid: 173). But they are a particular dead – they are victims of a brutal, genocidal regime. As such their symbolic power goes beyond the manipulability rendered by their anonymity. They are also instruments of the terror instilled by the Khmer Rouge, and it is this that gives them their status in Cambodia.

In his 1991 examination of terror in Northern Ireland, Allen Feldman argued that power is embedded in the body. Once inscribed with violence, he argues, bodies become as much political agents as those who authored the violence, because they cannot be extricated from that violence; 'the body marked by violence encapsulates certain political purposes, mediations, and transformations' (Feldman 1991: 70). This goes as much, if not more so, for dead bodies, because of their inherent manipulability. The skeletal remains, and the mass graves in which they were buried, cannot be removed from the violence inflicted on them by the Khmer Rouge, and because of this they will forever represent the power that the regime held, a power instilled by terror. They are agents of that power:

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the photographic displays at Tuol Sleng prison and exhibitions related to it (Sontag 2003), and the remains at Choeung Ek (Hughes 2005) although, as we have seen in previous chapters, this is a particularly ethno-centric way to view the remains, although it is an argument that could be valid when considering international tourists' encounters with the remains.



the dead maintain elements of the terror with which the Khmer Rouge ruled, and it is this element of them that enables their use by the current government in their pedagogy of terror (see chapter seven). The reality of domination, Feldman (ibid.: 8) writes 'is organized through the logic of mythic instantiation, and the body is a central medium of the political instant.' Every time the bodies are used in contemporary Cambodia, their inscribed terror works again, even on those who did not live through the regime, but who live the consequences of it everyday. It is because of this terror that many of my informants wanted to keep the remains; so that they, and others, may not forget the horrors of the past. The bones, Ta Chas informed me, were important for everyone, not only the younger people who had not experienced the horrors, or the foreigners who came to learn, but also those who, like himself, had lived through the regime:

They will make me remember it for my whole life. Even my children and grandchildren will remember it. There were so many people killed here. So it is a place to remember: the Khmer Rouge killed us.

These sites, therefore, act not as sites of commemoration of the dead (as we saw in chapters two to four) but instead as reminders of the Khmer Rouge as a mythologised 'phantasmoric 'genocidal clique' (Chandler 2008a: 363). In their repeated presentation of violence and death, they evoke the violence of dehumanisation and mass brutality by reproducing the same with the bones that remain on display and the glut of horror they represent. To commit genocide, to maim, to torture, to starve and debase thousands of people an element of dehumanisation is required. This was integral to the Khmer Rouge cadre's abilities to slaughter (Hinton 2005). The unnameable remains piled high at these memorials effects the same action, and in doing so signifies again the violence

that these people suffered and the regime that brought it about. A skeleton is not a person. They are easily removed from our understanding: an object of interest, of study, of fascination, maybe. But not a person.<sup>176</sup> But they are agents of violence because of the link to it they hold. And this is what makes their use so powerful.

## Conclusion

In 2006, the judges were sworn in and cases began in the Khmer Rouge tribunal – the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia<sup>177</sup>. The consequence has been a resurgence of interest in the Khmer Rouge period. The result of this is a revitalisation of the Khmer Rouge by the current government. The memorial sites have once again become useful sites of political power and the anonymous dead, that are themselves sites of fluctuating privilege and attention, are again useful silent entities to which others put voices and narratives.

In Cambodia important corpses, such as monks or Kings, are preserved because some element of the connection between spirit and body remains, along with the associated kin and community relationships (Marston 2006: 494). It is because of their social importance that these particular bodies are preserved. The dead from the Khmer Rouge are preserved for the same reason. As anonymous dead they maintain elements of powerful association with the regime and its violence. In the same way that other exhibitions of mass killing, such as the Holocaust

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<sup>176</sup> They also refer to Buddhist ideology; when we die, we are reborn; we travel through a continual cycle of death and rebirth. At every death the body that held us in this life becomes as if dry wood: it returns to the earth and thus helps form the new life.

<sup>177</sup> Readers interested in the establishment and workings of the ECCC should refer to Claussen (2008), Gray (2014), and the court's website (ECCC 2014).

exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, use the exhibition of physical artefacts to narrate history (Hoskins 2003: 14), in Cambodia it is the skeletal remains that do this.

One might think it strange that a party so implicated in the Khmer Rouge regime would work so hard at making its consequences visible by displaying the dead and holding commemorative events that re-enact the violence and devastation.

Ordinarily one would expect it to be an alternative regime that employs the power of the dead as a mode of political legitimisation – as a way of distancing itself from the regime that caused the deaths.<sup>178</sup> The manipulability of the dead enables their harnessing for almost any narrative. It also enables the obfuscation of other narratives and ‘truths’ that may exist. This, in fact, makes the Khmer Rouge dead, and their mass grave sites, ideal for use by the ruling party, which have strictly controlled presentations of the regime, and uses of the dead and their graves in multifarious ways since the deposition of the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

It is often the case that spaces remain neutral until they become politically useful: it is at this time that people re-forge an interest and ownership of the space and its contents. Springer (2008) proposes that public spaces in Cambodia are spaces of contestation – they are sites of protest - and control of the population is often practised through them by controlling access and legal activity within these spaces. As I have argued earlier, mass graves are eminently political because of the bodies they contain(ed) and the killing they bore witness to. This can be seen

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<sup>178</sup> Mass graves are particularly useful in this regard. Malaki’s government in Iraq has been excavating mass graves from Saddam Hussein’s regime since 2009 – every time they find a new grave, or begin work on older ones, news stories are released and photographers invited to record the grave. Throughout the contemporary civil war in Syria the news regularly publish stories of rebel caused mass graves and following the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya mass graves of those killed under Gaddafi’s rule started appearing in the media.

in the case of memorialisation of mass gravesites in Cambodia in the 1980s, their neglect in the 1990s, and the resurged interest but even more directed focus in the late 2000s. It can also be seen in the recording or omission of sites from 'official' information on the period.

The control of memorialization and the display of the dead within those sites creates a hierarchy of the dead and mass grave sites and erases from history and memory those not included. By doing so it also allows a particular story of the past to be told and reinforced through the landscape: that of a small number of perpetrators in an otherwise neutral landscape. The reality is, of course, very different: hundreds (if not thousands) of people were members of the Khmer Rouge and committed atrocities, and even those who were not cadre often co-operated to ensure their own survival, frequently at the expense of others (Ngor 2003). Throughout Cambodia, victims and perpetrators live side by side, and the land is filled (physically and metaphysically) with evidence of this violent past. But the 'preservation' of the Khmer Rouge story has become solely focused on the torture and killings that occurred within it, during a specific period (Democratic Kampuchea) at particular sites, omitting much else from the narrative. This proves incredibly useful in the two main ways it is put to work: nationally as a mode of maintaining fear, and internationally, as a means of engendering pity and sorrow. As Elaine Scarry (1985: 109) comments, 'what is "remembered" in the body is well remembered.'

In his discussion of the differing presentations of the Khmer Rouge regime by successive governments, David Chandler (2008: 356) wrote that Hun Sen's overriding concerns in the late 1990s and early 2000s were 'to develop Cambodia and

to maintain himself in power.’ At that time, this involved instigating ‘induced amnesia’ about the regime. Following the establishment of the Khmer Rouge trials, however, this amnesia is no longer feasible. It is much more useful, therefore, for Hun Sen to once again harness the regime towards the achievements of his goals. Chapter six will explore how tourism at Choeung Ek (and by extension other sites related to the Khmer Rouge regime) works towards the first aim (the development of Cambodia), while chapter seven will examine the second (his maintenance of power) by looking at political campaigning during the 2013 general elections in Cambodia.

## **Chapter six: Haunting the future - tourism at Choeung Ek**

As he walks around Choeung Ek carrying out his duties as a caretaker, Om Ta carries a small plastic bag. In it he places the small bones and teeth he finds emerging from the soil. Once he has a few, he takes them to a glass case where newly unearthed remains and bits of clothing are displayed. The displays are integral part of the tourist encounter with the site, and without the tourists, the site would be neglected. 'My job is important,' he told me 'because it's like we're helping our nation.'

Tourism in Cambodia is a growing trade. In 2014 4.5 million international visitors arrived in the country, contributing \$2.8billion to its economy (ADB 2014; Ministry of Tourism 2015). In the attempt to attract increasing tourist revenue, Cambodia has commoditised the Khmer Rouge regime and specific sites of suffering and death related to it. Choeung Ek is one of these. Although the site has many functions, its primary focus is tourism. In 2014 over 210,000 foreigners and 50,000 Khmer visited the site.

While most scholars have concentrated on Choeung Ek's place in Cambodia's circuit of dark tourism, or its use in the political narration of the Khmer Rouge regime, this chapter examines its place, not as a site faced towards a concretisation of the past, but towards the creation of the future. Offering a companion to Rachel Hughes' (2009) concept of the 'dutiful tourist' (one who after visiting sites of horror feels compelled to support the nation where they occurred), this chapter will show how such horror, pity and desire is harnessed by

my informants at Choeung Ek, and how in the exploitation of such sites, the ambitions of the state, local communities, and the tourist unite, albeit temporarily. It will also draw on Christina Schwenkel's (2006) theory of 'recombinant history' (where the meaning of sites of memory are negotiated, recycled, and reconstituted in neo-global spheres of imagination for economic development) to argue that in the case of Choeung Ek, its central role in Cambodian tourism is directly linked in the imaginations of the staff and the state to economic prosperity and social development, as well as to future peace and stability.

These are facilitated by international tourists, who by coming to the site, engage in reciprocal relationships with Cambodia, supporting it as they simultaneously learn from it. As they engage in these reciprocal relations Cambodia becomes connected to a wider global network and provide a means of imagining a more positive future, so whilst the transformations inherent in the commodification of sites of conflict for tourism alter and adjust collective narrations of the past, they do this in anticipation of the future. Such commodification therefore, and the transformations it both requires and engenders, are as much about hope and change as they are about reification and manipulation.

In order to explore these topics, I will first examine the theoretical framework of the chapter, before offering an introduction to tourism in Cambodia and its place in the wider development plans for the nation. The tourist encounter with Choeung Ek is designed to engender an overwhelming sensory encounter with the site's history, a description of which will preface the ethnographic section of the chapter which illustrates the role of tourists and the site in the future of

Cambodia, as imagined by Srey Srey, Om Ta, Bong La and Ta Sann. The ethnography for this chapter is based entirely in Choeung Ek as (until recently) the only official mass grave memorial for the country<sup>179</sup> whose primary aim is tourist income generation.

## **Theoretical background**

The popularity of Choeung Ek as a tourist destination is part of a widely reported trend of increasing global commodification of sites of suffering and death that put collective violent histories to work in the development of national identity and economic prosperity - so called 'dark' or 'thanatourism'<sup>180</sup> (ibid; Strange and Kempa 2003). For those directly connected to the site (by their own, a relative's or friend's experience) such places can offer a means of connecting and understanding personal experiences in the past and present (Kang et al. 2012; Lennon and Foley 1999, 2000). For people with no connection to the site, the motivations of such tourism are manifold: a desire for historical learning (Kang et al. 2012); an opportunity for existential contemplation on death and dying (Seaton 1996)<sup>181</sup>; or the feeling of a moral imperative to visit (Caswell 2014; Hughes 2008; Linfield 2010), for example.

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<sup>179</sup> Although Tuol Sleng has some mass graves it is primarily considered as a detention and torture center and is presented firstly as a museum and secondly as a memorial.

<sup>180</sup> Dark tourism refers to 'a diverse range of sites, attractions and exhibitions that are associated with death and the macabre' (Stone 2006: 145), while thanatourism is related specifically to sites associated with violent deaths.

<sup>181</sup> Few write on the voyeurism involved in such encounters, although Emily Godbey (2006) writes of the 'thrill of encountering the authentic and the real' in discussing the 'rubberneckers' of the Johnstown flood of 1889. Perhaps a great distance in time is needed to be able to confront or admit to this aspect of human encounters.



The primary attraction of sites of death and suffering is their materiality: they offer a tangible link to a history<sup>182</sup> that cannot be gained from remote sources; as such they engender a feeling of connection and embodied knowledge to the visitor (Huyssen 1995: 255). Megan Best (2007) argues that such sites are sites of emotion designed to provide embodied and affective encounters with the past. Violi (2012: 36) asserts that such 'trauma sites' 'exist factually as material testimonies of the violence and horror that took place there.' That they are preserved as sites of tourism displays choice by the post-conflict society 'about what politics of memory to adopt in each case,' of which she makes an interesting discussion, but her acceptance of the 'truth' presented by these sites is highly problematic. Bickford (2009) argues that public memorials are 'primarily tools of human rights education' and as such 'Choeung Ek and similar sites throughout Cambodia could become important places of truth-telling about the Khmer Rouge period.'<sup>183</sup> Paul Williams (2004) meanwhile, argues that both Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek are effective vehicles for commemoration, arguing that they are vital as reminders of the regime in a country where little justice against the perpetrators prevails. While there might be some validity to these arguments, they fail to question notions of 'truth' and 'fact', the human intervention required to preserve and display such sites, and the politics behind the conservation of certain sites and the dismissal of others.

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<sup>182</sup> I use history here to refer to events that happened in the past, which may have multiple and changeable readings and presentations.

<sup>183</sup> The multifarious issues with this report are too extensive to list here, but they include: normative assessments of the concepts of human rights, justice, democracy and citizenship; ethnocentric notions of healing; the problematic idea that memorials provide any kind of 'truth' (and the idea that there is one truth of the past); and a lack of discussion on the political influence on memorials and their presentation.

Jens Meierhenrich (2009) addresses this fluctuating privileging and dismissal of memorial sites by examining the Nyabarongo river in Rwanda as a site of 'underprivileged memory,' charting its transformation from 'a notorious *killing site* to a sanitised *building site*' (2009: 15, italics original). By doing this he discusses the relationship between memorialisation and modernisation. The river's transformation results from the conflicting forces of memorialisation and modernisation, where centralised projects of economic and political reform marginalise or even destroy decentralised efforts of memorialisation that do not perfectly suit the state rhetoric. This links to two major motivations for many states in the commoditisation of such sites: control of memory to support state rhetoric, and economic development, for which a particular narrative that appeals to tourists must be constructed. Wood (2006: 181 - 182) asserts several negative consequences of 'putting the country's history of suffering at the service of attracting revenue', including:

A singular version of history at odds with and at the expense of local participation; a memorialization apparatus that reproduces and extends existing hierarchies and lines of control; and an intensified commodification of historical sites and land that generates greater economic vulnerability and social tension.

Tegelberg (2009: 499) concurs, arguing that the commodification of Khmer Rouge sites for tourism 'threatens erasure of the more nuanced, multi-faceted cultural narratives that characterize the region's vast history.'

However, tourism is not only about economic prosperity. It also offers tools for political stability through its part in wider regional and global networks (Telfer 2002), and as Skinner (2006) notes, it is also a useful tool in the creation,

embedding, and maintenance of national identities and ideologies, as people create and perform particular narratives of the past. As such it is a 'highly political phenomenon' (Richter 1989: 2). Several previous scholars (Hinton 2008; Hughes 2005, 2008; Ledgerwood 1997) have focused on such politics of memory, exploring the use of Khmer Rouge sites in the creation of state narratives that control the history of the regime, and certainly this is a central feature of the use of Choeung Ek today. However, such arguments often fail to engage with the concept that while being economically and politically driven (often being a deliberate manoeuvre by the state to raise awareness, engender sympathy for various ends, attract tourist revenue (on which many may rely), and assert a presence in the geo-political sphere), the aims of such commodification are not necessarily at odds with the ambitions of local people, who may just as openly exploit such histories (and their own) to their own ends, and thereby direct it towards the future.

Rachel Hughes' (2008) article 'Dutiful Tourism' examines the motivations (or at least retrospective narrations) of tourists visiting Tuol Sleng, however, some of its arguments can be equally applied to Choeung Ek. She suggests (ibid.: 328) that people visit the site because they 'desire to be haunted;' through this haunting they can show compassion, sympathy and recognition of the suffering undergone in this, and other regimes. After visiting, she argues, they are compelled to become 'dutiful tourists':

The decisions of contemporary visitors at Tuol Sleng are refigurings of the world from within various discourses of morality. They (re)construct moral geographies which bring events of the past into proximity, allow political concerns to travel along with them and act in ways (albeit minor) that they believe will improve the lives of those in the places they visit. Their visiting involves returning to a moral

terrain in which mass political violence and its ongoing social and (geo)political effects are approached through dutiful exposure.

The 'Battlefield tourist' Schwenkel (2006: 4) asserts 'is driven by the desire to see, experience, and understand mass destruction and violence in the modern era.'

Many countries such as Cambodia, and Vietnam (where Schwenkel works) have taken advantage of this increasing trend to commodify sites of conflict and disaster as a means of promoting economic development. As these sites are recycled and reproduced, Schwenkel argues, the memories they materialise are rearticulated in increasingly transnational arenas infused with capitalist values.

This is not necessarily negative: the 'new' memories created via this commodification do not displace other understandings, but rather are constituted through a process 'of encounter and contestation' which add layers of meaning and understanding to the sites. This she labels 'recombinant history,' suggesting 'the interweaving of transnational memories, knowledge formations, and logics of formations' (ibid.: 5)

The aspect of Schwenkel's argument that I wish to engage with is that the narratives attached to such sites, therefore, are continually changing, and the re-imaginings and re-creations required for tourism are not necessarily negative, nor subsume other memories, but are seen as working for the benefit of individuals and communities as well as the state. In Vietnam the individual benefit is the veterans of the war, some of whom work as tour guides and to whom it provides an opportunity to share alternative histories to the state's, particularly important in a country that 'attempted to impose historical amnesia on the "losing" side' (ibid.: 20). Likewise, in the case of Choeung Ek memories and historical presentations are worked and re-worked in relation to the tourist market, a

negotiation that whilst requiring a compliance with one mode of narration, is imagined to my informants as providing benefits to themselves, their communities, and the state.

### **Choeung Ek in Cambodian Tourism**

Since relative peace was made in the late 1990s, tourism to Cambodia has increased steadily at a rate of approximately 20% per year (Ministry of Tourism 2015). In 2014, 4.5million international visitors arrived in the country, 90% of which were tourists, and tourism was the second largest income generator, and the third largest sector after agriculture and textiles, contributing \$2.8billion dollars to the economy (17% of the GDP) (ibid.). Its importance to Cambodia is illustrated by its place in the national investment and planning strategies: between 2006 and 2011, 54% of investment from the Cambodian Investment Board went to tourism (ADB 2014)<sup>184</sup>, and it is one of the five national priorities in Cambodia's National Strategic Plan (RGC 2014). This focus is part of a change in national strategy from political stability to (neoliberal) development, as explained in the NSP:

In the first decade until the 2000s, the highest priority of the RGC<sup>185</sup> was rebuilding the society, the economy and the infrastructure. In the second decade, the country began pursuing planned development in a market framework.

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<sup>184</sup> Resulting in, among other things, its branding as 'The Kingdom of Wonder.'

<sup>185</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia.

Hun Sen has regularly emphasised the importance of tourism in Cambodia's development, both economically and strategically in the region, and as Chheang (2009: 69) points out, in a country embedded in a patronage system with a top down decision making process, the words of the premier inevitably equate to national policy. Tourism is repeatedly referred to as 'green gold' in ministerial speeches (ADB 2014; Samouth 2013; PPS 2013), being viewed as a means of economic growth and poverty reduction through income generation and job creation, and political stability and co-operation through the negotiation and maintenance of regional allegiances in Southeast Asia (particularly through the ASEAN<sup>186</sup> network).

Tourism is also one of the ways the state promotes a positive image of the country to other nations; this aspect was viewed as especially important for my informants because of its unstable past, particularly the violence of the Khmer Rouge, which exists within living memory for many people visiting. For this reason, neither Choeung Ek nor Tuol Sleng appear on official government tourism information, despite the attention and investment that has gone into both over the years and their status as key tourist sites. Although its numbers are small compared to Angkor Wat (approximately 260,000 visitors in 2014, compared to Angkor Wat's two million), it receives over 25% of Phnom Penh's tourists (Ministry of Tourism 2015) and Choeung Ek is thus integral to tourism in the area.

Its use as a tourist site is not new. Since its discovery as a site of killing in 1979 it has always been outwardly facing; like Tuol Sleng it was quickly harnessed as a showcase of evidence of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and during the early

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<sup>186</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Member states are: Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic; Malaysia; Myanmar; Philippines; Singapore; Thailand and Vietnam.

days of the PRK, those visiting the site were almost exclusively brought by government officials as they used it in their post-deposition propaganda (Chandler 1999, 2008; Tyner 2012a). Over time however, the type of visitors began to change. Between 1992 and 1993, when UNTAC ruled Cambodia foreign soldiers became regular visitors and slowly as more visitors came of their own volition, family-run businesses started to open.<sup>187</sup> As the situation in Cambodia stabilised and visitor numbers increased, Choeung Ek grew in popularity as a tourist site. Easily accessible from Phnom Penh, with dramatic physical evidence in the form of skeletal remains and visible grave pits, the site is compelling. By the late 1990s it saw a regular influx of foreign visitors, and some tour guides from Phnom Penh began to situate themselves at the site. Bong La, was one of these; initially coming in 2000 under the advice of his aunt (who worked in the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts which had jurisdiction of the site at the time), he has stayed ever since.

In 2005 the site was privatized, and a 30-year lease given to a private company, JC Royal & Co: a Japanese-Khmer co-operative company that comes under the rule of Phnom Penh municipality.<sup>188</sup> The aim of this lease was to increase tourist revenue, and this privatisation has come under much criticism from both national and international media, who deem it disrespectful and accuse it of corruption

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<sup>187</sup> The first stall was run by one of the directors of the time. It was not his idea: a representative from Coca Cola brought the director eight cases of soft drinks and offered them to him for free. He found there was good money to be made, and as the numbers grew and type of visitor changed, it became a lucrative business.

<sup>188</sup> Though reported to be a Japanese company, the directors at the site told me it is a partnership: the JC in the title, they told me, stands for Japanese-Cambodian, and the Japanese provided overall plans of improvement of the site and capacity building skills, for which they receive some revenue (reportedly \$15,000 per annum).

(Doyle 2005; Kinetz and Kuch 2008; Mydans 2005; Sokha 2010; Yimsut 2005).<sup>189</sup>

Critics contend that it is abusive because of the foreign origins of the managing company and the exploitation of the human remains it displays (Becker 2013; Hughes 2005). But since Democratic Kampuchea Choeung Ek has never been about remembering the dead. It was firstly about erasing them, then about showcasing them.

The privatisation has led to changes in its layout and presentation, and added to the facilities available at the site. A small museum was erected, new toilets built, and when I was there a paved footway was being laid along the paths. Flowers and bushes have been planted, and benches put up around the site; a manager there told me its presentation is changing from a ragged exhibition of conflict to a peaceful park of memory ('I have mixed feelings about that,' she commented 'I can also see the value of trying to preserve a place that, of course will always be politicized, but don't we want to be able to show people this is what people can do to each other – this is what they've done here. So I'm also not sure that it should be made nice'). As part of the company's lease a charitable foundation was set up: the 'Sun Foundation.' Through this some proceeds go to charitable work; the site funds several university students<sup>190</sup> and gives money to elderly people in the local commune – eighteen families received \$10 and 15kg of rice per month when I was there. And even though the rest of the money goes to the municipality, those who work there, particularly those with experience from before, view its privatisation positively. 'Before,' Bong La reported 'it was only

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<sup>189</sup> One particularly damning article claimed that thousands of dollars in revenue have gone missing. 'They never came in to the site and interviewed us, and gave us a chance to explain' the site's director told me when I asked her about it.

<sup>190</sup> The number is unclear – one person told me ten to twelve students are supported annually, another told me that they have supported 550 since 2005.



under the government, and we had no idea what happened to the money they made at the gate. Now it's better because they have to tell us where it went.'

The tourist<sup>191</sup> encounter at Choeung Ek is a highly choreographed and heavily mediated experience designed to teach the visitor about the Khmer Rouge regime while engendering sympathy and empathy by engaging them in an immersive sensory experience. Passing through the gates of the site, visitors are directed first to the ticket counter, and then to the audio guide station immediately next to it. Almost none refuse the audio tour and it has now become the primary way by which tourists engage with the site; more or less the only people not taking it arrived with a guide from Phnom Penh, and nowadays even some of those encourage their clients to take themselves round with the audio tour. It is, of course, a highly designed tour of the space, and provides directed readings to both the encounter and its interpretation. That is its job: to guide those who take it on what to pay attention to, both visually and imaginatively. And as a provoker of emotion, and connection with the site, it is both powerful and successful.

The tour follows a pattern most western museum-goers are familiar with. Narrated by a Khmer 'survivor'<sup>192</sup> it leads you around to notified stops, at each directing attention to specific aspects of the site: the area where prisoners were held before being taken to their deaths; a chained off area where bones are emerging; the 'Magic tree' from the branches of which hung speakers that blasted music to disguise the sound of killing. As it moves along the path that winds around the site it tells the story of the Khmer Rouge and of Choeung Ek in

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<sup>191</sup> I use tourist here to mean international visitors, because the encounter for Khmer visitors is very different and much less mediated and designed, as will be explored later.

<sup>192</sup> Many of the voices on the recording are actors.

particular. The limited signage tells of terrible things: the bodies of one grave had no heads; another contained only women and children. Rows of pits cover the land, separated only by a small winding path that the tourists walk down. In the path under their feet, remains are emerging; shards of bone: fragments of people. Like any good story the horror and tension is built – its climax at the centre is stop fifteen - the tree where babies, held by their feet, had their skulls smashed against the trunk (figure ten). Reaching this climax, it calms the mood, moving on to discuss Cambodia's future, and the place of Choeung Ek as a memorial to mass death. It ends drawing connections to other global sites of genocide: Germany, Poland, Rwanda, and others.



Figure ten: Choeung Ek killing tree (source: the author)

The final location is the central stupa. At more than 30metres high it dominates the site, which revolves around it. Inside are piled the skeletal remains of over

8,000 people<sup>193</sup> excavated from the site in the early 1980s (see chapter one, figure four). These dusty remains are stacked inside on shelves behind glass doors. Their arrangement amplifies their impact; skulls separated from long bones; long bones from short bones - the dead ruptured from their living selves not only by mass burial but also by skeletal dismemberment. Clothing piles on the bottom shelf, the next seven filled with skulls, all facing outwards, so no matter if you are child or adult, wherever you look hundreds, thousands, of skulls at every level meet you eye to eye. Above the skulls, the other bones; the shelves so high that when I tried to photograph its height my camera could not capture it. The space is small; the confinement physically forcing you eye-to-eye and body-to-body with the remains. Inside is humid and slightly fetid and tinged with the faint but distinctive smell of decomposing bone; sweat and bone dust tangled together: scents of the living but also the dead.

### **Ethnographic case studies**

Having introduced the place of tourism in Cambodia, and tourism at sites of war and death, this section will now move on to present three ethnographic encounters at Choeung Ek, illustrating how my informants view the design of the site and its use in tourism. By doing so it will show how my informants conceive tangible and abstract benefits from its use, as the tourists become engaged in reciprocal relations with the site and country. Three stories are presented. The first shows how Srey Srey and Om Ta view the use of human remains as a vital element of the tourist experience at Choeung Ek, which they view as significant to

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<sup>193</sup> The exact number of people represented by the remains in the stupa is unknown: the site reports it is 8,995, but that seems very precise and based on my experience of other forensic efforts in Cambodia, unlikely to be completely accurate. I prefer, therefore, to give an estimated figure.

the local community's wellbeing and development. In the second we meet Ta Chann, a man living locally to Choeung Ek, whose sister, cousin, their husbands and children, were killed at the site. This encounter demonstrates how, even for those whose dead are at the site, its place as a location of historical education is viewed as crucial, but also how such displays relate to ideas of international aid and awareness. The final encounter is with Bong La, who views tourists as integral to future political stability and social development of Cambodia.

### **Displaying death, ensuring life**

Om Ta was probably one of the hardest working people at Choeung Ek. He rarely took a rest, moving constantly around the site, keeping an eye open for jobs that needed to be done, people that needed helping, or animals that needed tending. 'My job is important' he told me one day as I accompanied him around the site. 'It's like we're helping our nation. The reason I say so is that it is the government. The government is the country. It's like I'm helping the country. Even though I can't help much, as a cleaner, I am helping.'

As he works Om Ta carries a small plastic bag, tucked into a pocket of his shirt or trousers. As we were talking one day he pulled the bag out of his pocket to show me what it held. There in his hand was a grisly collection: teeth and shards of bone, splintered from larger ones. Walking around the site Om Ta keeps his eyes alert for these remains. If he sees them in the grave pits he leaves them alone, but any he sees in the paths that wind around the site he lifts, adding them to the bag in his pocket. Once he has a small collection he takes them to the case with the other remains.

Collecting the remains was important for two reasons, he told me. Firstly, putting them all in one location together is a means of respecting those who have died. But secondly they are an important part of why tourists come to see the site. The use of the remains in such a way is not new, he explained; it has been so since the site was first discovered. Om Ta has much experience of the remains: his first encounter with Choeung Ek was in the early 1980s when he came to loot the graves with his father; he found a watch and his father found a long military coat which he used for years before it wore out. He was employed soon after this as a guard at the site, and watched as the remains were unearthed and prepared for display – all clothing, ligatures, and blindfolds were removed and the flesh detached from the bones. After several months of drying they were moved to the wooden *p'teah khmouch*, and carefully arranged to make the most impact on those visiting the site. When they came across a skull they believed to be of foreign origin the workers made sure to display it at the front:

We were told to bring the skulls and bones and put them there. I saw a grave under the tree. I saw a long, big skull. It was strange. Then some people said they wanted to place that in the front. We placed it in the very front; we worked on that arrangement. It must have been a foreigner — either an Australian or American<sup>194</sup>.

Its arrangement at the front of the stupa was, Om Ta confided, aimed at the foreigners already starting to visit the site. This consideration continued after the central stupa was built; before the bones were moved experts came from Vietnam to conduct some basic skeletal analysis on the skulls, organising them in

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<sup>194</sup> Over 500 foreigners were killed at Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng. Most were Vietnamese, but a handful of other nationalities also suffered (Ea and Sim 2001).

the stupa by sex and age. This analysis never had any forensic use: 'it makes it better for the visitors if they know something about them' Om Ta explained. These labels can still be seen on the stupa shelves but the skulls are now confused; about a year before my fieldwork started the remains had been taken out of the stupa for cleaning, and during the process had become muddled and some broken. Those broken were put to the back and the ones in tact arranged at the front, all with their faces facing outwards.

Srey Srey participated in this cleaning. Srey Srey takes great pride in her work. Working seven days a week, Choeung Ek has become an extension of her home, and she views her colleagues as extended kin. Amongst her duties as a cleaner is the maintenance of the graves, and the cleaning of remains. Every day at around 2pm a group of cleaners and caretakers gather to sweep leaves and other debris from the mass grave pits, and to collect bones and clothing emerging from the soil. In the dry season little emerges, but during the rainy season (May to October) the rain washes away the soil and erodes the edges of the graves, and as the season advances and footfall aids the soil dispersion, skeletal remains and clothing are slowly uncovered (see figure eleven).



Figure eleven: human remains emerging at Choeung Ek (source: the author)

Like Om Ta, Srey Srey collects remains and frees bits of clothing from the soil as she cleans. Not all the remains are collected though; some are moved and displayed in different areas to ‘improve’ the tourist experience.<sup>195</sup> As well as remains being moved around, Srey Srey confided, others were left in the paths that people walked on, to improve the attraction of the site to international visitors; ‘one of the guys said: “If we clear all the bones from the ground, what we going to see? We will have nothing to see.”’ ‘Some want to show them as evidence for children,’ she explained, ‘but some want to attract more visitors to see the Cambodian history and improve Cambodian economics.’ At first, Srey Srey told me, she was shocked by this attitude, but from watching the tourists interact with the remains she soon recognised their impact: ‘They come here to

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<sup>195</sup> I looked out for these mediations with interest. On one day a pair of the black rubber sandals similar to those used by the Khmer Rouge appeared under a photograph showing the excavated remains stacked high in the early 1980s. They had not been there the day before. On another day a fragmented femur lay fully exposed in a chained off area that the day before had been empty except for leaves and dirt.

see these skeletons, to see who was killed,' she commented, 'and when visitors come they can tell others that Cambodia has a place where they keep the bodies of the dead from the Pol Pot regime.'

By paying money to enter the site, the tourists are directly inputting to the site and the well-being of the community surrounding it, Srey Srey told me, because not only does it provide safe, well paid, employment for many people, but since the company took over its management, infrastructure has improved and money is given as charitable contributions in the surrounding areas:

They support orphans and give scholarships to [university] students. I think they're not wasting the money. [They give money to] older people.... When the company came, I expected that it was going to be hard. But when they actually came in, it was really good.... It's better than before. They have clear objectives that are acceptable [and] it improves our lives. It's much better now.

Despite these advantages, Srey Srey sometimes felt conflicted about the mediation of the site's experience for the tourists; 'they [tourists] work so hard at home and they come here just for freedom, but sometimes, we also have propaganda,' she commented. But overall she believed the work of the site is good, and the use of the remains acceptable. People want to see the dead, and they are willing to pay to do so. After seeing this they return to their country and, she hopes, tell people about Cambodia; about its past, but, more importantly, about its present and future; 'the visitors help Cambodians. When the international visitors help Cambodians, it makes me happy. So I think what the government does today is right.'



Om Ta had no such confessions. He considers Choeung Ek to be integral to development of Cambodia, and by inference, his job too. 'Maybe this place does business using the skeletons,' he commented. 'But they are important.... I think some people are maybe jealous that we get money [from the site].... It is good for people who live around here and for people who work in this place. 'It's like we're helping our nation.'

**'If we forget about it, history will be erased'**

Ta Sann is an elderly man who has lived close to Choeung Ek for all his life. He was introduced to me by one of the managers on the site. They had been acquaintances for a long time, because Ta Sann had been one of the only people beyond the guards working at the site who knew its function during the regime and as such had been involved with many research projects at Choeung Ek as people tried to pin down its past. Before the regime took power he supported their soldiers, dealing food and medical supplies to them, and after power he remained in the area with his family. He was a member of the Ministry of Social Affairs, working as a farmer in the local co-operative that managed food distribution in the area.

Ta Sann was one of the many thousand low ranking Khmer Rouge cadre who, although working in and supporting the regime, were also themselves victims of the purges, social control and execution of family members and friends. Towards the end of the regime, his sister was taken from their commune one afternoon as they worked. This was fairly common, and those around them knew that once taken, they would not return. Someone ran to him, shouting that his sister had been taken to the East. He knew this probably meant her demise:

I thought if they had taken her to the East, it must have been to this place. I knew that Prey Sar prison was where they educated people, and that Taleong village was where they re-educated [kāsang] them, and if they came here, they had to die.

He dreaded the consequence of this news, and wanted to check for himself. So he borrowed a bike, and rode to the site, where he saw the trucks unloading the passengers. 'I had access to the site' he said, 'because I worked for social affairs.' There he saw his sister, her husband and their ten-year-old child. 'I saw their faces, and I turned around because I was afraid that I would cry. Then I left' he told me. Later in the regime his brother, cousin and cousin's wife were also taken to the site, along with his former boss, who first was processed by Tuol Sleng. 'I went to see his photograph [afterwards]. They pulled out his toenails and stuff.'

Ta Sann is a political pragmatist, who was not always a supporter of the Khmer Rouge. When the Lon Nol regime was in power, he collaborated with them; when they lost power he turned to the Khmer Rouge. Following the fall of that regime, he turned his allegiance to the current government ('They were all related,' he commented when I asked him about this. 'Some didn't follow [politics] closely like I did. I followed it very closely in each regime. I learned since I was young'). Nowadays, recognising the lack of social benefit to being associated with the Khmer Rouge, he tells few people of his involvement in the regime, claiming instead that he knew about the site from others.

Following the regime's collapse, he returned to the site, being employed to guard those excavating the graves. He worked alongside others, counting the skulls that were unearthed, and assisting their arrangement for display. Amongst the bones

of those displayed are potentially those of six family members - his brother, sister, her husband, his niece, cousin and cousin's wife - and at least one former colleague. We talked about this at some length. He told me he came regularly to the site, and was pleased with the way it had been managed over the years, particularly the use of the human remains as a tool of education. That tickets are charged is not a problem, because it is a historical site, and historical sites all sell tickets – he had heard, he told me, that at Angkor Wat the tickets were \$20 or more, and still tourists went. 'Foreigners want to visit historical places,' he commented, before continuing:

Not only foreigners want to visit, some Cambodians also don't know anything about Choeung Ek. Everyone wants to know, wants to learn this history. If they know that there is a place, there is evidence, showing the killing during the regime, everyone would want to see it, both foreigner and Khmer, especially the younger generation.... It is important. It tells more from what we see here than if we only hear the story from mouth to mouth. People were killed without reason. So we learn about it by seeing this place.

The preservation of the remains is integral in this. 'I feel proud' he told me when I asked him about his families remains being displayed at the site. 'If they knock this place down, I would be disappointed.... [The regime] is over.' Choeung Ek is a place, Ta Sann felt, where those who died could be honoured and remembered, and the stupa holding their remains gave a place for the government to look after them. But most importantly, he explained, it presents Khmer history to young Cambodians and foreigners.

[if the remains were cremated], it would disappear, and the younger generation will not remember it. If it's here, they could say oh that's where my mother, my

father were killed. Bones became a mountain. This is my idea. I think it's good in the history. It's better to keep them, to let Khmer and foreigners know. It's an important thing. We need to let foreigners know. So many people were killed because foreigners didn't know.

### **Building a future by using the past**

The final ethnography tells the story of Bong La, and relates to some of the more abstract benefits of the Choeung Ek use as a tourist site. One day as Bong La and I sat chatting he started telling me about his children. It was late January and a breeze was blowing across the site, making the day cool by Cambodian standards. A few tourists were wandering around, but it was still early, so we had time to sit and enjoy the time.

Bong La's two boys were seven and ten, and were getting to the age where they were becoming more independent, listening less to their parents and more to their friends and people at school. This worried Bong La. Though he loves Cambodia and is generally happy in his life there, he is concerned about the moral economy of the country; the disregard people have for each other and the environment, and the endemic corruption of government and other authorities. 'The Khmer are all oppressed now' he confided one afternoon; 'we can only hope for international help.'

This help could come in many forms. But one way of getting it was through the work of Choeung Ek, and by interacting and learning from the tourists who come to visit it. He often brings his children to the site not to teach them about the

Khmer Rouge and its results, but to show them the behavior of the tourists, particularly their respect for the environment:

I teach them by example. You know along the road, people drink tea or something and then they just throw [litter] on the street. If one person does it, the children will follow. So what happens ten years later? This place could be a field of rubbish. So I want to teach them this, and I learnt a lot about it from visitors, a lot about hygiene. Like the plastic from around the top of a bottle of water – they even put that in the bin – it's very nice; I like that action; it's good that they always clean the area. So I bring my kids here and say 'look at what that man does, [throwing away] his drink like that.' So it's good yeah. I hope that Cambodians, who lost a lot of history, will start looking at other countries to help Cambodia. Not the bad things, the good things.

Bong La has a strong affection for the tourists at Choeung Ek. He has always enjoyed learning from other people, particularly those from other nations; it was this that influenced his decision to become a tour guide in the late 1990s. We often sat watching the tourists arriving, chatting about them and their actions. When I first started working at Choeung Ek I would often feel offended by what I viewed as the inappropriate and disrespectful clothing that many tourists wore. One day a young woman arrived with her boyfriend. She wore minute denim shorts and a top that hung loose at the side, exposing her bra. As I ranted to Bong La about this attire, he laughed and said 'it doesn't matter: we don't mind. At least she has come and will see and learn.' Later he explained 'when they come here, they learn about Cambodia' he told me. 'Sometimes I feel sad seeing [the dead] all stacked up like that' he said commenting on the remains, 'but I don't know too how to keep the story in everyone's mind.... many of them they really

share these experiences with others, because they know about [Cambodia's past] only from Choeung Ek Killing Fields.' This sharing could only be positive he told me, because as they shared, others would want to visit, and this brought people who could help Cambodia develop.

That is not to say that he is naïve about the potential risks of tourism, and we had many discussions about some of the more serious issues Cambodia faces related to this, such as sex trafficking and paedophilia. But he viewed these as minimal compared to the overall benefits that he personally engaged in, and that tourism brought to the country. Although the money raised by the site was useful in general for Cambodia's economic development, it was the scholarships given to university students that Bong La thought most important:

The reason we are providing money is because we want the students to concentrate on their studies, not anything else, so that there will be more human resources [in Cambodia]. Because in the past, it was a lack of human resources that led to killing without any consideration. I think that when there aren't enough human resources, the country can't develop. For example, Hong Kong can develop because there have a lot of human resources.

The Khmer Rouge's propaganda is considered by many to have been so successful because they eliminated the intelligentsia, and instead relied on poorly educated rural farmers, children and young people to run the camps and enforce their laws. Improving education therefore, is viewed as a way to prevent movements of this type and scale in the future. The tourists' money at the site helps enable this through the charitable legacies in which they engage.

As we talked I asked Bong La about the negative perceptions of the site's privatisation. 'Yes,' he replied, 'this is difficult. I know this is difficult because this site is not only historical, it is also political.' He found it hard to explain the advantages of private management to foreign visitors, as well as the benefits of the site, but he summed it up to me:

this company is much better than before because we have a management system; it's much better than the state – the Cambodian State – but foreign visitors, you know, when they ask me 'I heard that this is private company, is this a private company?' sometimes I cannot explain everything; actually they're Cambodian, but the name is just written like that. Sometimes it's really hard. All of them feel they want to come and help, and to preserve this site, not just for business, but to help find justice. But it helps Cambodians develop themselves, because at that time we lost a lot of teachers, a lot of life....

Overall, he explained, '[the company's] work is like merit for Cambodia.' The merit comes from its place in the education of tourists about the regime and the country, as well as in the money it raised that goes, not only to the Phnom Penh municipality, but also to the local community. This is because matters left only to Cambodians, he believed, were corrupt:

I think that if we hope on the Khmer, there's no hope at all. We can only depend on the international community.

## **Discussion**

Invoking history to generate income and the commodification of sites of tragedy is neither a new nor unusual phenomenon. As Venbrux (2010: 44) writes,

‘throughout our contact [with other people] death-tourism has been a prominent mode of cross-cultural interaction.’ What is new in recent decades, however, is the globalized aspect of such tourism, and the increasing state harnessing of this in economic development and regional strategy. In this global, increasingly neoliberal economy, Schwenkel (2006: 5) argues that the use of such icons of war entwine the past and the future, by recycling and reimagining such sites in ‘a transnational economy of memory for the sake of prosperity and development.’ This economy is fluid and flexible, and is used and manipulated not only by the state, but also by every day people involved in these sites. As we saw in the cases of Srey Srey and Om Ta, the use of such sites in tourism have tangible benefits for the people who live there. But beyond that they exert influence on the wider local community, and Cambodia as a whole, and some of my informants, such as Bong La saw them as contributing to future stability of the nation and the region.

The desire to explore ‘war-torn’ histories drives exoticism by international visitors who actively seek to view and experience its tragic past (Schwenkel 2006). In doing so it appears to reify some of the images and narratives being presented. As my informants construct, reconstruct and perform these narratives every day, they become further entrenched as ‘truth’ in the minds of those consuming them. But these narratives can have positive, future oriented results, as argued by Hughes (2009) with regard to ‘dutiful tourists,’ who after visiting such sites feel an obligation to provide aid of one form or another to Cambodia. The marketing of Choeung Ek is not simply a matter of presenting it as is. It requires an understanding about the global perception of the Khmer Rouge, and knowledge of what attracts international



visitors. Although this has been facilitated recently by collaboration with foreign stakeholders<sup>196</sup>, my informants were already skilled at this.

The power of Choeung Ek is in its physicality, its materiality and the embodied connection it gives the visitor to Cambodia and this period of its past. The sensory immersion offered by the choreographed tour momentarily collapses temporal distance. The deliberate exposure of human remains and preservation of the graves<sup>197</sup> in particular provide a notion of authenticity and realism to the site. On war tourism in Vietnam, Schwenkel (2006: 8) noted that tourists felt that 'war was more tangible in Cambodia,' it was 'more real' than in Vietnam because of these human remains and their location in a place where visible traces of their death and mass burial is still evident. Tourists I watched visibly slumped as they reached the grave of women and children. People cried as they rounded the lake at the back of the site, listening to commemorative music. 'The Killing Fields' were 'raw' one told me afterwards. A friend coming back from visiting the country told me he felt 'ashamed; so ashamed;' another 'we left the killing fields feeling very heavy.' But this authenticity is framed and performed, and the display within it heavily mediated. The audio tour directs attention<sup>198</sup>; employees at the site arrange the

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<sup>196</sup> The Japanese arm of JC Royal & Co produced the development plans aiming to improve its appeal to international tourists, and the Australian based Narrowcasters that developed the audiotour (which was written by an American scriptwriter in English first so as to appeal to an audience used to museum tours and particular ways of seeing).

<sup>197</sup> As the years pass the mass grave pits are starting to erode and disappear. Some pits have merged; others become shallower. This is worrying the site's management. 'I wanted the government to build glass covers over the graves, because they weren't this shallow [before]... the rain erodes them and fills them in.' one told me.

<sup>198</sup> Being so directed many miss much of the site they are looking at. They walk on bones and clothing without noticing it under their feet, because earlier in the tour they have been directed to pay attention to those coming through the earth in chained off areas. They walk or sit on Chinese gravestones, not noticing they are graves, or not caring because they are the wrong sort of dead: they do not represent the horror these visitors have come to see. They were not tossed in pits and piled on top of each other. That this is a gravesite of appropriate, familial burials, as well as mass graves, becomes irrelevant - only one type of dead is to be noticed: those killed during the Khmer

artifacts; and by doing so they embrace and harness the tourist gaze. My older informants, such as Om Ta, seemed particularly adept and comfortable with this.

This is not simply predatory commodification in search of economic prosperity, although sometimes it might appear that way. Nor is it necessarily exploitative of the dead and their remains. As we saw in chapter two, though politically motivated, the display of human remains and the use of mass graves was not viewed negatively by my informants, and even those who objected personally (for example Bu Soth who thought no-one should make money from the dead), thought perhaps the dead did not mind; they did not haunt and had never made people sick. The case of Ta Sann shows that even those whose relatives were killed at the site, and whose remains may therefore be amongst those displayed, saw them as playing a positive role in the future development of Cambodia. Chan, a teacher from the school close to the site commented:

The income they collect... their sufferings, gave us ... gives us all ... gives me ... provides benefits to all the people... provides a benefit to society, which is to live comfortably/safely (*sok s'roal*), because of their horrific deaths. So I think that their suffering death is valuable for the next generation, like myself.

By engaging with imagined visitor motivations in the design and performance of Choeung Ek my informants perceived both tangible and abstract benefits to themselves, Cambodia, and its future. The site gives them a job, Srey Srey told me, and supports the local community. Om Ta commented that he was helping the country by working there because of its place in Cambodia's economic

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Rouge. It is not the tourists' fault per se: all the literature claims that the site 'used to be a Chinese gravesite,' eliminating from concern the few Chinese graves that remain.

development. Bong La saw personal, national and global advantages: in the ways he could teach his children about the environment, and the use of income from the site in funding scholarships that would help ensure a more secure and stable future. This has implications for the future of Cambodia: Bong La likened its potential to Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan, and in doing so illustrated the promise of development. And as it improves, like *tvea bon* and *bangskol* ceremonies, Choeung Ek is helping the country as a whole to gain merit, and improving its karma as it does so. Its work (their work) is related to the moral economy of Cambodia; something many I interviewed considered lacking and in need of support.

This is not, however, a unilateral relationship. Instead it was viewed as a reciprocal relationship between the site and its visitors. Most staff at Choeung Ek used the term visitor (*neak tossna*) or guest (*phngeav*), rather than tourist (*neak tesschor* – literally person who makes a tour) to refer to those who come to the site, whether foreign or local. Implied therefore, in the tourist encounter, is an element of hospitality and a host-guest relationship. Hospitality acts in the mode of a gift, and although Tesart (1998) insists that a gift ought not be reciprocated, I agree with Mauss's (2002 [1950]) assertion that there remains an obligation, and an expectation of return. At Khmer Rouge sites this return is both tangible and abstract, and imagined by both sides: the tourist and those working at the site. The site's central role in Cambodian tourism is directly linked in the imaginations of the staff and the state to economic prosperity and international assistance, and the reciprocated relationship, therefore, is with the tourists who help develop the country. My informants embraced tourism, and the reciprocation it implied.

It is not only Choeung Ek that uses the past in such a way. The *p'teah khmouch* at Koh Sop has been preserved and the pastor from the island's church regularly brings foreign visitors to see it. A ghoulish painting close to the entrance of Phnom Sampeau in Battambang indicates its former use; there local guides take tourists on the back of their motorbikes to see where people were thrown from the top of the mountain into a cave below, before guiding them to the spot where their bodies were smashed and the remains now sit, piled high in a concrete *cheddei* (figure twelve).<sup>199</sup> In Anlong Veng Ta Mok's house, the alleged site of Pol Pot's funeral pyre, and the burial site of his cremains, have all been turned into tourist sites, renamed as 'The Cultural Site of the Khmer Rouge.' Market sellers in Phnom Penh have embraced this interest, producing acrylic TinTin covers featuring the Khmer Rouge, and selling replica propaganda posters from the Vietnamese war.



Figure twelve: Khmer Rouge tourism at Phnom Sampeau (source: the author)

<sup>199</sup> At Banan in Battambang province, however, where the main tourist attraction is an Angkorian temple, the bodies on the surface were collected and cremated, or covered with soil, because people returning after Democratic Kampuchea thought tourists would not like to see such bodies when they have come to see an ancient site.

Neither is it only Khmer Rouge sites that are honing in on this side of tourism. There is an increasing market for sites of sympathy throughout Cambodia. Opposite Choeung Ek a restaurant run by the 'Cambodian handicap association' is always bustling, but no disabled people are employed there, they are not allowed inside the restaurant, and the money raised goes almost entirely to the family who run it. In Phnom Penh and Siem Reap cafes and shops advertise their employment of trafficked women, ex-prostitutes, orphans and disabled people. As tourists move around Cambodia they are immersed in an image of a country that not only suffered from a terrible past, but continues to need help. The resulting impression left on tourists visiting these sites is one of overwhelming suffering and ongoing problems that cannot be recovered from. As one tourist told me, 'I got the impression Cambodia is a whole nation with PTSD.'

Of course not all tourists consume the site in the same way, and although the audio guides provides a directed narration there is not a homogenous reception to the site. Even when their consumption is designed and choreographed, landscapes are not static. They are contested, negotiated, political and dynamic (Bender 1993: 2 - 3), their meaning being worked and reworked through different people's engagements with them. They are multi-layered, and the interests in them and meanings inscribed within and upon them move, overlap, collide and, sometimes, clash. Choeung Ek and other Khmer Rouge sites are international landscapes that speak to a global imaginary of mass death and violence. Hence Choeung Ek's transformation from a memorial into a museum, made intelligible to the thousands of tourists who pass through its gates every day by a guided audio tour: one that directs them where to look, what to see, how to feel. At the moment, my informants view its use as a tourist site primarily positively, with tangible and

abstract advantages. But as we saw in chapter five, the uses and narratives related to such sites, while appearing static are fluid, particularly to those who produce them.<sup>200</sup>

Where frustration against tourism existed amongst my informants at Choeung Ek, it was not directed at the tourists<sup>201</sup>, but at the government's continued corruption. Criticism against Choeung Ek was turned into a political matter – a desire to erase the violent past. 'The people who said this maybe don't want this place to exist,' Om Ta commented. 'If this place didn't exist, we would forget all the painful stories.' Before the company took over, Bong La told me, a man had arrived from the Ministry of Defence. Though he was Khmer and did not have to pay, he took two dollars out in front of the ticket booth. '\$1 for Sihanouk; \$1 for Hun Sen' he said. For this reason Om Ta, Bong La, and other besides, preferred the sites management by a private company which had to make public its accounts, and whose policies of social responsibility were visible in the local community, to sole direction by the government. Tourists were seen as potential allies in the endeavour against this; the more people who came to Cambodia, and the more widely it was known about, Bong La commented, the less able the government would be to control them so strongly.<sup>202</sup> 'This is for the benefit of humanity' he commented.

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<sup>200</sup> Although perhaps there was more flexibility before the audio guides, because the knowledge being shared relied on a tripartite encounter between tour guides and tourists, and the physical encounter with the site.

<sup>201</sup> This might be partly because of Choeung Ek's segregation from the home lives of those who work there: the site is fenced off and closed at 17:00, so even those few families who live on the site have space away from the tourists.

<sup>202</sup> My informants were not, however, naïve about the political nature of Choeung Ek. The director told me that the municipality is their parent, and they at Choeung Ek are the technicians of the government's vision. One of the other guides refused to comment on the site and its uses; 'if

## Conclusion

When I first arrived at Choeung Ek one of the managers asked me if I had ever been to any of the Holocaust memorials such as Auschwitz or Dachau. 'How does this site compare?' he asked me; 'how can we make it more like those?' Another asked me to conduct basic skeletal analysis on the skulls: providing sex and age categories 'because it will make it better for the visitors.'<sup>203</sup> Although privatized in 2005 the site has always been externally focused; from day one this required a shaping of the narrative about these sites which whilst targeted to attract an international audience, which has most likely affected local understandings as well, particularly given the lack of other historical narratives on the period until very recently (Latinis 2011; Tyner 2012a). Khmer visitors receive a very different site. Though several thousand visit per year, most come as part of the ECCC sponsored visits; their trips are brief (usually around ten minutes), they receive little guidance, and most simply wander in and wander out again with little idea of what they are seeing. The few signs that exist are in English, and even when 'remembrance' ceremonies (such as *Pchum Benh* and New Year) are held, they take place at the side of the site so as not to disturb the tourist paths around the site.

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someone breastfeeds you, you should breastfeed them back' he said, a Khmer idiom equivalent to 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine.' When I first knew Srey Srey she refused to discuss such topics, saying it was not her place to comment. 'I know that the tourists just come to visit Cambodia. Sometimes, they visit here to learn about the living conditions in Cambodia. Some people just come to see what Cambodia is like...' she told me. 'It's difficult for me to talk about it; this is politics.' Over time, however, she started to talk more freely and could discuss her views on the use of remains.

<sup>203</sup> I never did do any analysis, although when I left Cambodia the management was still planning to have it done at some stage.

This commoditisation for the international market has been criticised by many, however, as this chapter has shown, it was not deemed offensive or disrespectful by my informants, but rather embraced and engaged with as a means of providing future benefits. Supporting manipulations and transformations of the past are embraced because they provide security in the present, and offer future potentials for positive change for Cambodia and its people.

Choeung Ek represents something slightly different to most Cambodian tourism, where the benefits of the income do not trickle down to ordinary people. The impact of the money is evident in the support of the local community and the scholarships given to students. The benefit of the tourists is visible in the roads the site has built, the improvements to the site, the new jobs and social relationships it has created. Tourism at Choeung Ek was viewed by my informants not as manipulative and exploitative, but as positive and supporting. Tourists help the country, both now and for the future, and by working for the site, they do too.

Of course the future might not turn out the way my informants imagine, particularly if the current government remains in power. A number of issues are already apparent in Cambodian tourism. Some of these, such as sex trafficking and drugs, were discussed by my informants, but many others were omitted: the stress on infrastructure caused by increasing demand (Becker 2013), or the increasing land insecurity as people are forcibly evicted from land that is then developed. But whether the future arrives in the form imagined is not really the point. In using the site, Bong La, Om Ta, Srey Srey and Ta Chann all a mode of asserting their place in Cambodia's future, and by doing so providing merit for themselves and their nation.



One afternoon, as we walked around the site, my research assistant, Bunnwath, turned to me. 'You know,' he said 'Pol Pot did some terrible things. But it left a lot of sites that are really good for tourism.' This comment, made with a hit of irony, was an observation on the use of Choeung Ek, and the voracious appetite of foreign tourists for such sites of death. But such a statement can also suggest a connection between the violence of the Khmer Rouge regime, and the political sphere of contemporary Cambodia, a theme that will be explored in the next chapter.

## **Chapter seven: Dead of today, ghosts of tomorrow - elections and the spectral Khmer Rouge**

Fear, the arbitrator of power – invisible, indeterminate, and silent.

*- Linda Green 1994: 227*

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The 2013 general elections in Cambodia were a tense affair. Om Srey was nervous; ‘I remember the Khmer Rouge’ she told me as we sat chatting after dinner one evening. ‘I will keep voting for Hun Sen because he saved us from them.’ Our chat came as I planned to return to Phnom Penh for a meeting a few days before the election. ‘Are you really going?’ she asked me, ‘aren’t you scared?’

The political sphere in Cambodia is fraught with violence, particularly around elections. In 2012 and 2013, tension was high, because for the first time in nearly 30 years, it seemed that the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) faced a genuine challenge from the main opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). The ruling party’s mode of dealing with this was two fold: reinforcing the threat of direct and structural violence (particularly to opposition voters) that helps maintain their rule, and beginning a smear campaign against the opposition party. For both ends, they harnessed the symbolic power of the

Khmer Rouge and their dead; raising the spectral presence of the regime and its violence. The CPP were not alone in this. The opposition CNRP also used the Khmer Rouge and their gravesites in their political propaganda, but for them it was to remind the populous of the former status of the Prime Minister and other CPP officials as Khmer Rouge cadre. Both parties used rhetorics of violence throughout their campaigning that manifested threats on individual, community and national levels.

This chapter explores the 2013 election time in Cambodia, as a locus that makes visible the violence pervading Khmer politics. Using Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology - the specters of a past that inhabit the present and shape the future; the haunting by spirits to which all experiences are connected – I will argue that contemporary politics in Cambodia is a new manifestation of the violence that has scourged Cambodia's past, particularly the Khmer Rouge regime, which contemporary politics was formed in opposition to, but which has been politicized to reinforce violent narratives that maintain its spectral presence as a constant threat within the Khmer imaginary, reinforcing political insecurity amongst the population.

To explore these concepts, I will first examine the theoretical framework for this chapter, before briefly describing elections in Cambodia. This will provide the framework for the ethnographic section, which will first describe the annual remembrance ceremony held by the CPP at Choeung Ek, next a political rally organized by the ruling party against the opposition shortly before the elections, before discussing the election time as experienced by my informants and myself in Koh Sop. These examples will highlight how the Khmer Rouge regime was

revitalized by the 2013 elections, heightening the insecurity and fear already inherent in the political sphere. The discussion will return to Derrida, but also consider Linda Green and Allen Feldman's explorations of fear and insecurity, to show how the active husbandry of the Khmer Rouge specters not only reminds people of their violence, but also reimagines and recreates a political sphere in which violent discourses are the norm and authoritarian, violent rule is maintained under the guise of liberal democracy.

### **Theoretical background**

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (1994) created the term *hauntology* to describe the continued presence of Marxism in the post-Marxist world. While haunting expresses the ongoing presence of something past (or in the case of deceased beings, passed), hauntology derives from the French *hantise*, and includes more nuanced expressions, including 'obsession, a constant fear, a fixed idea, or a nagging memory' (Derrida 1994: 177, note XX).<sup>204</sup> Derrida used this concept to argue that, despite some academics arguments that it was no longer significant following the fall of the Berlin wall and the associated end of communism, Marxism was, in 1993, more relevant than ever. It is both impossible, he argued, and unjust, to claim to exist in the world without reference to Marx because contemporary deconstructions of Marxism actually serve to create new conceptions, based on, and evolving out of, precisely those deconstructions. In this chapter I will use this concept to explore contemporary Khmer politics, which

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<sup>204</sup> Although the translator, Peggy Kamuf, continues to translate the term as haunting throughout the book, it is undoubtedly this plurality of meanings that attracted Derrida to the term, because its conception, he informs us, began as he contemplated the haunting obsession that, he argued, organized dominant discourse today (Derrida 1994: 37).

is not only haunted by the Khmer Rouge regime, but which would not exist without them and is formed in relation to them.

The specters<sup>205</sup> of the past not only inhabit the present, but come from the future: linear temporality is collapsed by these specters because their most dominant characteristic is their imminence: 'It is the future itself, it comes from there. The future is its memory' (ibid.). This can be interpreted in multiple ways: that if there is any future, it will be this one, or that in the iteration of the spectral past, its revival becomes not only imagined, but possible: in re-entering the popular imaginary it again takes life, and in taking life, it is both re-enacted and re-constructed.

For Derrida, there were multiple specters – not only Marx himself, but also the ghosts that haunted Marx's work, and those that haunt subsequent societies (Macherey 1999: 18). The same can be said of Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge haunt its present, but conceptions of the Khmer Rouge are themselves haunted by those regimes and conditions that preceded and followed them: the US bombing campaign of the 1960s, the Lon Nol government of 1970 – 1975; the PRK of 1979 – 1993; even actions of the current regime, whose rule of direct and structural violence maintains these specters within the present, and takes them to the future. 'To understand the Khmer Rouge' Om Ta commented, 'we have to understand the situation a little bit before and after Khmer Rouge':

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<sup>205</sup> Derrida uses the term 'specter' preferentially to 'spirit' or 'ghost' because unlike Plato's phantasma - the simulacrum of a particular something - a specter is both intangible and tangible; it is a memory, a recreation, an imprint, a shadow, but it is one that affects the form and actions of those it haunts (Derrida 1994: 7).

the story of Cambodia was not just from 1975 to 1979, there was more than that. This was the effect of the Cold War. It was not just those years. Before 1975 what had happened? After '79 what would happen?

The specters cannot be rationalised away – they haunt the historicized present and shape its future. They are therefore integral to contemporary Cambodia, extending Veena Das's (1997) critical events – it is not only that Democratic Kampuchea demarcates a paradigm shift in Cambodian life, but that it forms the basis of every reimagining and reconstruction of social, political and religious life in Cambodia. The 2013 elections highlighted this.

'As the core of democracy' Coles (2004: 553) wrote 'elections are a cultural practice as well as a political one.' Their cultural performance is arguably ritualistic, and, therefore, performative as well as symbolic. Although democracy 'wields hegemonic authority' through its apparent distinction from society and subjectivity (ibid.), it is a socially embedded construct, constituted and performed locally through its attendant rituals such as elections. By drawing on local discourse, elections create and perform the local articulation of democracy as a set of practices and artifacts that reify consolidate feelings of community and belonging and state ideologies purporting freedom and human rights. Democracy exists, therefore, as a plurality; the local articulation of which is highlighted during elections.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> The plurality of democracy is highlighted by Björkman's (2014) exploration of the flow of money during the 2012 elections in Mumbai, in which she illuminates how contested issues of modernity (such as the neo-liberal and political landscapes) are negotiated in relation to traditional forms of patronage and exchange systems that exist in everyday India throughout the year. In this case, money works not as a medium of purchase, but as a gift exchanged for alliances and social affiliations.

However, while seemingly ideal performances of liberalism and democracy, elections can be fraught affairs surrounded by discord and violence, and their practice is often as much about geo-politics as it is genuine local desires. This is exemplified by the violence that often surrounds them, particularly in states that have only recently adopted democracy as the political landscape. But this violence is not necessarily completely destructive, and can be socially advantageous as well as politically useful. The 1994 elections in Mexico, for example, provided a site of uprising for indigenous people, highlighting economic and social inequalities, which opened the door for political reform and new sites of political inclusion across the social spectrum (Fiederlein 1996). Jonathan Spencer (1990) meanwhile shows that in 1980s Sinhala, Sri Lanka, social disputes and rifts were expressed as political differences, and elections therefore provided the opportunity for the expression of ordinarily repressed emotions. Election times, therefore, although sites of acrimony and excitement, provided a space for the renegotiation of social differences; not only in the selection of representatives to govern, but more widely in social networks and relationships

Uprisings and contestations can only occur, however, when people no longer fear the consequences of these contestations. State engendered violence surrounding elections usually relates to the consolidation and solidification of political power of the ruling elite, through terror and violence that maintains authority through fear and tension. The violence is most common when the ruling power feels threatened (Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski 2014), as was the case for the 2013 elections in Cambodia. In the 2002 presidential elections in Zimbabwe, for example, Robert Mugabe used rhetorics of racial division (focusing on the unilateral land ownership by white people) to incite violence against the

opposition by young, black people, who posed the greatest threat to his chances of re-election (Lindgren 2003). Plots of land from farms they occupied rewarded their violence, and their support for Mugabe was consolidated, whilst re-visiting the ethnic divisions and political violence of the 1980s, when distinctions between different groupings of people were manipulated to garner support through fear, violence and rhetorics of oppression.

### **Elections in Cambodia – a brief overview**

Elections are a recent introduction to Cambodian politics; the first national ones were held in 1993 under the supervision of the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC), as part of the arrangements of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, which aimed to bring peace to the region and an end to the ongoing conflict between the Khmer Rouge and the PRK. These elections were deemed a success by the UN and many other commentators (Findlay 1993; McCargo 2005; Sanderson and Maley 1998)<sup>207</sup> and reportedly marked a transitional point in Khmer politics from authoritarian rule, to neo-liberal democracy (something that many of my informants noted). However, despite their seeming success, (FUNCINPEC received a majority) the results were overturned following pressure from Hun Sen and a coalition party formed instead. Every election since has been subject to violence and surrounded by accusations of corruption (HRW 2015). Sanderson and Maley (1998) argued that the 1998 elections (which followed the 1997 coup) remained a contest between liberal democracy and authoritarian rule – a contest won by the authoritarian rule of the Cambodian People’s Party. My experience in Cambodia indicated the same: the ruling party, using threats and

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<sup>207</sup> McCargo (2005: 99) notes one of the successes being that ‘very few people lost their lives’!



actual violence, governed with authoritarian rule under the guise of liberal democracy, an illusion supported by international governments and business.

We saw in chapter five how the CPP and Hun Sen came to power following the 1979 deposition of the Khmer Rouge, and how their rule has continued ever since. 2013 was the first year since the UNTAC elections of 1993 that the CPP faced a genuine challenge from the main opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). Formed in 2012 by merging the Sam Rainsy Party (led, unsurprisingly, by Sam Rainsy) and the Human Rights Party (led by Kem Sokha), the CNRP was gaining momentum and support in the run-up to the 2013 general election, particularly among the increasingly disillusioned youth of Cambodia. In previous years this had not been such a threat to the ruling regime; the majority of voters had lived through the Khmer Rouge regime, and as such, were not only grateful to the CPP for making peace with the Khmer Rouge and ruling a relatively peaceful country, but also lived in fear of the regimes' revival. In 2013, however, approximately 1.5 million young people became eligible to vote (Hughes 2015), and over one third of the voters were aged between 18 and 25 years (Lohman and Enos 2014). Many were disillusioned with the government and its mode of ruling and were seeking change, offered by the newly formed CNRP. This youth did not deter the political parties from using the regime in their propaganda, however; by doing so they aimed to manipulate the older generation, and remind them of the violence. However, it was not only through reminders and re-vitalisation that Khmer politics revived the specters of the Khmer Rouge, the main parties themselves re-enacted the violence and domination of the regime through the use of fear and tension, using terror as a mechanism of power to garner support and foster suspicion.

## **Ethnographic Case Studies**

Having outlined the theoretical background for this chapter, this section will provide an ethnographic exploration of the Khmer Rouge hauntology, made explicit by the 2013 elections. Covering events occurring between May and September 2013, it will show how in my fieldsites, tension and fear were built incrementally by iterations of violence and reminders of the Khmer Rouge that re-animated both the regime and its other violence and insecurity, reaching a climax at the time surrounding the elections. First I will describe the May 20<sup>th</sup> memorial event held by the CPP at Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, where the violence of the regime is re-enacted in grotesque realism annually. I will move on to discuss a political rally held by the ruling party against the CNRP in June 2013 in Kep province of Southern Cambodia, and finally, I will explore the increasing fear and tension that grew around election time as experienced by my informants and myself in July and August in Koh Sop.

### **Spirits of the past: the 'heroes' of the nation**

May 20<sup>th</sup> 2013. Bodies lay strewn across the grass: women; children; men. As I looked on, a Khmer Rouge soldier dressed in black, with a red and white krama<sup>208</sup> knotted around her neck, took a palm leaf and drew it across a prisoner's throat. Another took the butt of his gun and smashed it on to the back of a man's head, knocking him to the ground. A male soldier grabbed a woman, and, dragging her by her hair, pulled her to the floor, where he thrust his body against hers, as if to rape her. The carnage continued for almost fifteen minutes. The sound of

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<sup>208</sup> A traditional Khmer item, the krama is a large piece of strong material, often in a chequered pattern, used for almost everything: headscarf, sarong, dishcloth, baby's hammock, handkerchief and more or less anything else a large piece of material might be handy for.

gunfire, screaming and beating filled the air, alongside another sound: the murmur of chatter as people looked on.

This terrible spectacle was an act: part of a remembrance ceremony held annually at Choeung Ek by the CPP. Before the killing started, we watched as the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia to cheers and jubilation. We saw people being driven from their homes into the countryside, before being put to work, from which many collapsed and never rose. We witnessed people starving, dying from disease, and countless executions. The 3 years, 8 months and 20 days of Democratic Kampuchea was enacted in excruciating realism to us spectators; all Khmer except for me and one media cameraman.

Sompoah, my research assistant, and I had arrived at Choeung Ek around 8.30am, catching a lift from Phnom Penh with one of the managers from the site. After the cool of her air-conditioned car<sup>209</sup>, the heat was already overwhelming as we made our way to the central stupa, where the event had already started. Crowds circled the green that had been the holding site of those arriving at Choeung Ek for execution – nowadays an empty space of grass. Three sides were bounded by colourful marquees, offering shade for the important guests: over a hundred saffron-robed monks on one side; the other two crammed full of official invitees, primarily members of the CPP - local officials and government employees conspicuous in their black trousers and white shirts. The rest of us stood under the blistering heat, crowding to get a better view. Sompoah and I made our way up the steps of the stupa: from the top level we could look down over the heads and watch the proceedings.

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<sup>209</sup> A luxury for Sompoah and I, who usually made our way down the pot-holed and dusty road by tuktuk or motodop.

As we made our way up the steps we listened to the speeches being broadcast over loudspeakers. 'We come here to remember the heroes who saved Cambodia, the party who are heroes of our nation, who did such good' the compère, an âchar from a pagoda in Phnom Penh, announced. 'We all thank you' he continued, 'and we wish you all the luck in the upcoming elections. We pray you are successful.' The next speaker, a representative of the Khmer Cham community<sup>210</sup> was no less effusive: 'Thank you [CPP] for organizing this event, and thank you Samdech Hun Sen<sup>211</sup> for allowing us to practice our religion freely.'

The re-enactments were graphic; women were beaten, children torn from their parents, people executed. The crowd crammed to see over each other's heads; children pushed their way to the front; one man lifted his son, a boy of two or three years old, onto his shoulders to get a better view. When the field was littered with bodies (figure thirteen), the troops came in to save Cambodia.

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<sup>210</sup> Cham (an ethnic group in Southeast Asia who live primarily across Cambodia and Vietnam and follow Islam) were targeted by the Khmer Rouge as a group for extermination, particularly under Hun Sen, and Heng Samrin's directions in the Eastern zone (Human Rights Watch 2015a).

<sup>211</sup> Samdech is an honorific title meaning princely or lordly, usually given to those providing great service to the nation. Hun Sen has recently given himself the title *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo*: Princely Exalted Supreme Great Commander of Gloriously Victorious Troops.



Figure thirteen: Khmer Rouge re-enactment at Choeung Ek remembrance event (source: the author)

To much heralding, soldiers in the military uniforms of the government marched in, holding high three flags: the blue flag of the National Front<sup>212</sup>, the red and yellow flag of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and the blue flag of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), but noticeably missing the Vietnamese flag. If the message had been obtuse before, these final flags made it explicit: the CPP saved Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge. As the re-enactments ended, and after a few short chants to send merit to the dead, the attendant monks stood to collect offerings from the attendees. As they rose, the âchar once again took the microphone: 'Don't forget to vote for the [Cambodian People's] Party in the elections in July.'

Though including the Buddhist chants that enable merit to be sent to the dead, this was neither a religious ceremony, nor an event of remembrance of those who

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<sup>212</sup> The Khmer United Front for National Salvation (not to be confused with the opposing Khmer People's Liberation Front), usually shortened simply to 'The Front' or 'The National Front', consisted of opponents to the Khmer Rouge regime, and formed the core of the PRK.

had died during the regime.<sup>213</sup> It was instead, a graphic reminder of the Khmer Rouge, reified as a homogenous, evil entity of terror and chaos, removed from power by the heroic CPP. Speaking with attendees afterwards, no-one mentioned the dead. Instead it was the Khmer Rouge that was the object of commemoration: 'it is important for us not to forget the Khmer Rouge' one woman told me 'otherwise it might happen again.'

Once all had finished I wandered to my usual spot at the front of Choeung Ek with the audio-guide team. Bong La was taking headphones and audio players from tourists as they left the site and I joined him, helping prepare the players for the next people. As we worked I asked him about the event. 'It's really hard' he said. 'I'm used to it now, but at first I found it frightening, and it shocked me.' Bong La, aged 32, did not experience Democratic Kampuchea, but his parents lived through it and told him many stories. Bong La himself grew up in Kampong Cham, and had vivid memories of the latter years of Khmer Rouge violence: in the late 1980s and throughout the early 1990s his village had been subject to many raids by the regime. 'When they were coming the commune leader would hit a bell, and we would hear: "Pol Pot, Pol Pot; Pol Pot's coming again! Pol Pot's coming again!" We would run and hide. Sometimes they stole things. Sometimes they burned the houses. One time they killed some people.'

The re-enactments initially reminded him of these raids, and of the stories his parents had told him of their suffering. By now, having worked at the site for

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<sup>213</sup> The presence of the monks served primarily to legitimate the cultural and moral legitimacy of the event (Gray 2014): the monk's presence also provided a means by which people could improve their own karma through the action of *tvea bon* – making merit by giving offerings to the monks and the pagoda they came from.

many years, he was used to it, and had noticed some changes in recent years: 'there used to be many more people' he told me, 'but every year it gets less and less. The young people don't come. But still they use the same story about the Khmer Rouge.'

'The other party, the opposition party, they also have a remembrance day here' he told me. I had been away at the time, and had not known about the event, and until this point May 20<sup>th</sup> was the only remembrance event date that I knew of. 'Do they come on the same day?' I asked. 'No' he replied, laughing, 'different days. Sam Rainsy's party comes on 17<sup>th</sup> April.' In 2013 the CNRP event at Choeung Ek was small, only attended by around 200 people. Sam Rainsy, the leader of the opposition party, was in self-imposed exile in Paris at the time, avoiding an 11-year sentence that was, reportedly, politically motivated. However, opposition party members arrived from Phnom Penh, and the deputy leader and acting president, Kem Sokha, led a small ceremony during which a video link was established with Paris through which Sam Rainsy spoke. At this event, Rainsy (quoted in Meas 2012, my highlights) stated:

***The new generation of Khmer Rouge***, puppets of Vietnam, have killed people little by little.... ***Both Pol Pot and Hun Sen*** have always celebrated April 17 because they regard it as their victory day.

April 17<sup>th</sup> is the day in 1975 that the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh and took power.

Occurring so close to the elections, the 2013 events provided a place where the violence of the Khmer Rouge could be reiterated, but also provided occasion for

links to be made between the respective political parties and the regime. The parallels drawn were more convincing and better animated because of the connection to the dead and their violent deaths of those at Choeung Ek (see chapter five). However, remembrance days by themselves were not enough; although they were useful tools of political propaganda, to really instill fear and insecurity, and the viable threat of the Khmer Rouge, continual reference and reanimation was required. This happened incrementally throughout the campaign period, with statements made either alluding to the Khmer Rouge, or explicitly threatening their presence. In response to Sam Rainsy's comments at Choeung Ek, Hun Sen threatened Cambodia with 'internal war, akin to the Khmer Rouge period' if the opposition were to win (Naren 2013). Earlier in the campaigning he had likened the CNRP themselves to the regime (quoted in Vannarin 2013a, my highlights):

They have said both openly and in whispers that once they are elected they will eliminate everyone's debt.... This is what I mean; ***the Khmer Rouge has returned.***

Such statements however, needed reiterating to become a genuine threat in people's imaginations, something helped along only a few weeks later by a political rally led by the ruling party against the opposition.

### **Spirits of the present: rallying against the opposition**

In June I visited Phnom Grahom in Kep, a Khmer Rouge re-settlement village built in the 1990s as part of the win-win policy. One of the last strongholds of the Khmer Rouge, the area around the village is home to several mass graves, and the mountains and forests behind it were witness to many battles and much death,



both during and after Democratic Kampuchea. The local village chiefs and several of the commune council were former cadre; some had been responsible for much of the horrors that had occurred in the area. All were members of the CPP.

My local assistant was Soth, a reserved man of around thirty who had grown up in the village. After finishing work each day we would plan the next day's visits: where we would go, who we would see. Appointments were never made in the Cambodian villages – we simply arrived at people's homes or work places and asked to talk. If people were not there, or were too busy to chat, we returned another day. Sometimes it took several visits to secure a meeting, but usually people would stop to give us time. One evening I asked to return the next day to speak to Ta Thom, one of the village chiefs. I wanted to ask about his experiences immediately after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in the early 1980s. 'It's not possible' Soth told me, 'he will be at the rally.'

Four weeks earlier a media storm had broken loose when a recording was released in which Kem Sokha, deputy leader and acting president of the CNRP, allegedly denied the veracity of Tuol Sleng as a prison and killing site during the Khmer Rouge. During the recording, Kem Sokha (quoted in Mengleng and Zsombar 2013) can be heard suggesting the Vietnamese staged the prison as a site of political propaganda:

The Vietnamese created this place with pictures [of the victims]. If this place is truly Khmer Rouge they would have knocked it down before they left ... if the Khmer Rouge killed people, would they keep it to show to everyone? If they knew they killed many people, why would they keep this place?

The recording, released on May 26<sup>th</sup>, two months before the 2013 general elections, provoked outrage. The day after it was released, Chum Mey<sup>214</sup>, a survivor of Tuol Sleng held a press conference at the site, at which he threatened to sue Kem Sokha if he did not retract his comments. Within a week the Cambodian government began discussing legislation against denial of the Khmer Rouge; following the banning of 27 opposition lawmakers from parliament, the anti-genocide denial legislation (the 'Law against Non-Recognition of the Crimes Committed during Democratic Kampuchea') was rushed through parliament and passed into law on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 12 days after the initial release of the recording. Although they stated that it would not be used retrospectively, this was largely held to be a political move by the CPP in the run-up to the elections.<sup>215</sup> Putting this legislation in place while Kem Sokha's alleged denial was still fresh in people's minds served two purposes: it instilled the idea that Kem Sokha was a genocide denier and, therefore, a criminal; not someone you would trust leading your country. At the same time it reminded the country of the suffering caused by the Khmer Rouge, and reiterated the narrative that only the ruling party could ensure Cambodia's continued protection from such a regime – the opposition obviously could not be trusted to safeguard Cambodia if they denied the veracity of its violent history. This was made all the more vivid by the location Kem Sokha had

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<sup>214</sup> Chum Mey is a survivor of Tuol Sleng who has written a book about his experiences (Mey 2012). Chum Mey has commoditised his survival; he makes a living at Tuol Sleng, where he has a small booth at which he sells his book to tourists and has his picture taken with them. Bou Meng, another survivor, also sells his own biography (Vannak 2010) at the site. Both are officers of Ksean Kmey, an association that works with the ECCC to collect vicim narratives for the court proceedings. Although commonly reported that only seven people surviving Tuol Sleng prison, more than 100 people have now been identified as having passed through the prison during the regime (Eng 2013), however, only Chum Mey and Bou Meng make their living at the site.

<sup>215</sup> In addition the Article 19 Law Programme at the Free Word Centre in London examined this law and found it to be in violation of international human rights on freedom of expression, and labelled the legislative process by which it was passed 'deeply flawed' (Article 19 2013).

allegedly denied: Tuol Sleng; torture and detention centre, killing site, mass grave, and international symbol of the violence of the regime.

Whilst the media concentrated on the rally occurring in Phnom Penh, protests took place across the country. Being in Kep at the time, I attended the rally at Wat Kampong Tralach, along with a somewhat reluctant Soth (who was anxious not to be associated with the CPP), and my partner, who was also conducting research in the area at the time.

Like many pagodas across Cambodia, Wat Kampong Tralach had been used as a detention centre and killing site during Democratic Kampuchea. Following its fall the Khmer Rouge abandoned the site but left it littered with the corpses of those who died there; 'there were *khmouch* (recently deceased bodies) all over the place. They were everywhere in the pagoda,' an elder told me the first time I visited the site). As with many sites, after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea local people had collected the bodies and piled them in a *p'teah khmouch* replaced in later years by a concrete *cheddei*. This concrete stupa now houses the skeletal remains, stacked neatly on two shelves. The *cheddei* stands at the back of the pagoda and appears as any other modest stupa within the temple grounds if you do not know what to look for. For some of the monks at the pagoda, it is relatively unimportant. It is 'somewhere to look after the bones of those who have no relatives' an elderly monk commented, but it was, in his opinion, no different to any of the other stupa across the wat complex. However, whenever a political campaign takes place the *cheddei*, or more specifically the skeletal remains within it, became significant; in this case it was the rally against Kem Sokha.

At the rally, over seventy trucks - official government vehicles - each jammed full of people, drove through the district, blasting denunciations of Kem Sokha from loudspeakers. Arriving at Wat Kampong Tralach, people unloaded and marched to sit in front of the Khmer Rouge *cheddei*. Many of the teenagers, and some of the adults, carried placards bearing reactionary slogans (figure fourteen): ‘We will remember for the rest of our lives the Pol Pot soldiers’ brutal acts on our village,’ ‘Kem Sokha is fighting against the Khmer Rouge Trial,’ and ‘Kem Sokha is more cowardly than Duch’<sup>216</sup>. The placards had identical lettering, and the same statements repeated over and over again.<sup>217</sup> As my partner later wrote: ‘it had the appearance and feel of a regimented spectacle’ (Hull 2013).



Figure fourteen: protestors at rally against Kem Sokha, June 2013 (source: the author)

<sup>216</sup> This placard is particularly interesting. Duch was commandant of Tuol Sleng prison during Democratic Kampuchea who, after being located working for an American charity in Northern Cambodia in 1997, surrendered himself up to the government for imprisonment. His trial was the first at the ECCC, and in 2010 he was convicted of crimes against humanity, torture, and murder and imprisoned for life. The name Duch has become a symbol for many of the terror and violence of the Khmer Rouge.

<sup>217</sup> Subsequent newspaper articles covering the rally in Phnom Penh showed the same slogans repeated there, again carried by the CPP Youth (Chansy and Zsombor 2013)

Once they arrived in front of the *cheddei*, local CPP officials made speeches condemning Kem Sokha and the CNRP. The *cheddei* doors stood open, displaying the bones inside; those speaking stood in its doorway, backed by the skeletal remains of those who had died during the Khmer Rouge regime (figure fifteen). The stupa had been cleaned and decorated in black and white, as usually denotes mourning or a funeral. I asked a caretaker whether this happened often. 'Only when *Ângkar* (the organization – meaning the government) tells us' he replied.

A couple of thousand people attended the rally, and the numbers implied that people were angry and hurt by Kem Sokha's alleged denial of the Khmer Rouge actions at Tuol Sleng (and by inference therefore, across Cambodia). People in the village, however, told a different story. Each local village chief, all CPP members had, a few days previously, been ordered by the district office to send at least 50 villagers to the protest. When asked what would happen if they did not comply, one replied 'it's not a choice.' The commune, Soth told me, organised the rally. The teenagers attending were from the local CPP Youth. A CPP official from the local district office spoke at the event; 'Kem Sokha must be made to answer for his crimes' he said. 'Hun Sen has saved the country. We must continue to support him.'



Figure fifteen: Protestors listen to speeches in front of the *cheddei* of remains (source: the author)

Like the remembrance ceremonies at Choeung Ek, the rally was an event seeking to reanimate the Khmer Rouge, but also evidence of how politics in Cambodia is performed in spheres of distrust, violence, corruption and manipulation.

### **Spirits of the future: fear and rumour**

At the start of July I moved from Phnom Grahom to Koh Sop. Like Wat Kampong Tralach, Koh Sop had been the site of a prison and killing site during Democratic Kampuchea; as an island it was an ideal location for containing people. Arriving so close to the elections, many people at first did not trust me; several members of the community had originally been suspicious of me, supposing I was working for the government, recording information about the village to report back. For some of the more wary people it had taken several weeks before they would talk to me beyond saying hello.

As the elections neared, tension and fear became palpable in the village. A few days before the event I had a meeting in Phnom Penh. The city was close enough that I could travel for the day, and Phasy (my research assistant) decided to come with me to visit her friends in the capital. When we arrived at Om Srey's house for dinner the night before we went, the message that we were travelling to Phnom Penh had reached her. As usual, after dinner we sat chatting on the bamboo platform at the front of her house as she sat on the steps leading up to her house. 'Are you really going to Phnom Penh?' she asked me; 'aren't you scared?'

The violent discourse of the pre-elections campaigns was startlingly effective in raising the tension that accompanied Khmer elections. Rumours started to circulate, amongst both Khmer and international communities of impending violence and chaos. In Koh Sop stories reached us through relatives working in the capital: that the army had been deployed to Phnom Penh; that there were tanks on the streets<sup>218</sup>; that Hun Sen's personal guard<sup>219</sup> had been expanded; that opposition supporters were being beaten or killed. One story was that Deputy Prime Minister, Sok An, was threatening to overthrow Hun Sen, which would undoubtedly lead to horrific violence, and war; it was, after all, the overthrow of another leader (Lon Nol) that had marked the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime. The tension was heightened because of Sam Rainsy's arrival back in

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<sup>218</sup> Following the elections, with rumours of electoral corruption and dissatisfaction about the results making protests a threat, the media reported the deployment of tanks in Phnom Penh on August 9<sup>th</sup> (Crothers and Dara 2013) and again on August 16<sup>th</sup> (Asia Sentinel 2013). Friends in Phnom Penh at the time never saw any, and I am uncertain whether this story was simply a re-iteration of the still circulating rumours. Simons (1995: 53), when writing about the violence in Mogadishu in the late 1980s, wrote that rumours become knowledge in the absence of other information that could be substantiated. There may be an element of this. Now reported in the media, it appears tanks were deployed in Phnom Penh.

<sup>219</sup> Hun Sen has a unit of 5 – 10,000 personal bodyguards within the Cambodian military that have been implicated in many violent clashes occurring over the years.

Cambodia. The leader of the CNRP party had been in self-imposed exile in Paris, avoiding an eleven-year prison sentence that most commentators agreed was politically motivated (Curley 2014; Karbaum 2012; Peou 2011). Following a royal pardon, he returned less than two weeks before the election and promptly set about harnessing the dissatisfaction already rife amongst many Khmer youth.

The insecurity people felt was manifested in a number of ways. Many of my informants were afraid to discuss many issues, particularly those they considered not to be the business of 'ordinary people.' Hun Sen reportedly keeps a network of spies across Cambodia. On the run up to the election people were visibly afraid of the consequences of opposing, or being deemed to oppose, the ruling party. Neak Srey, a young woman who worked in the city, was an opposition supporter, but as the election neared she hung large CPP posters across the front of her house. Her CNRP stickers were hidden from view on the inside of the legs supporting her house, displayed where only trusted friends and family would see. Approaching the outskirts of Phnom Penh in late June, the driver of our taxi leant over to the glove compartment and withdrew a baseball cap with the CPP logo embroidered on the front of it. He placed it in his windscreen prominently displaying his apparent allegiance to the party. Soth later explained that people were afraid, not only of violence, but also of the structural violence opposition could result in. 'There might be violence,' he explained, 'but it can also be about administration. If they vote for the opposition, and then want to get a passport, or maybe some papers they need for the hospital, it will be impossible. Whatever they want to do in the future they can't.' This anxiety existed in some of my informants, who clammed up if they thought the subject had got too political. Om



Yay, for example, refused to talk about the retention of the skeletal remains of those who died under the Khmer Rouge:

It's hard for me to talk about this because the party [the CPP] might threaten us if we say something wrong. It's difficult to speak out now.... If I say something, there might be a spy. If I say something is not good, they might arrest me and imprison me in Prey Sar prison<sup>220</sup>. It's hard. So I don't really want to talk about it. I'm scared.

A local shop owner expressed similar sentiments:

I'm afraid to talk about this issue. I refuse to talk about it.

**Everything is confidential....**

I'm just afraid that this record might be used for some kind of political issue.

The silence extends impunity, engendering further political violence, both locally and nationally. However, most of my older informants continued to vote for the CPP. 'I remember the Khmer Rouge' Om Srey told me. 'I will keep voting for Hun Sen because he keeps us safe from them.' The memories of Democratic Kampuchea made the fear of the country descending into war stronger than the fear of political violence. However bad Hun Sen and the ruling CPP were, they had 'saved' Cambodia and, subsequently, developed the country and kept it stable. Om Srey told me that Hun Sen built the roads, the schools, the hospitals. When a fire burnt down her house in the 1990s, it was, she said, Hun Sen who gave her a

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<sup>220</sup> Prey Sar prison in Phnom Penh is Cambodia's largest prison. It houses around 500 inmates, (mostly men) however, it is also home to several high profile and extrajudicial prisoners, including several foreign inmates. Conditions at Prey Sar are notoriously poor, with overcrowding, little food or drink provision, high levels of corruption, and poor sanitation (LICADHO 2015).

tent to stay in and food to survive with. Hun Sen and the CPP deserved their support, she explained, because they had rescued them:

the people who rescued the country [the CPP]; we all said so long as they rescued us, we would do anything [for them].

In the days following the election tension remained high, particularly as the results were delayed. Rumours continued to abound but this time of electoral corruption: the indelible ink that marked voter's fingers was, apparently, washable, and some people voted twice. In some areas, double ballot papers were printed. In others people (mostly opposition voters) arrived to vote, only to discover they were not registered. The result, which was expected on 1<sup>st</sup> August, was delayed. As the days went on we all waited anxiously: some in hope, some in fear. Om Broh was one of the few villagers with a radio, and he and other men from the village would sit listening to it in the evenings. Walking past his house on our way home from dinner we would stop to find out if the result had been announced yet. They came less than two weeks later, on 12<sup>th</sup> August, but that two weeks felt interminable.

Though the number of seats held by the CPP dropped dramatically (from 90 to 68), the ruling party reported that they had won the majority in all but four of the 25 Cambodian provinces (CNRP won the other four provinces, and 55 seats in the senate).<sup>221</sup> It was the CPP's worst result since elections had begun, heightening the anxiety already felt amongst my informants. For weeks after the elections the circulating rumours sparked stories of past violences, maintaining the ever-present fear at a level bubbling just below the surface. The district where Koh Sop

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<sup>221</sup> The National Election Commission, a supposedly independent agency, consisting entirely of CPP members, subsequently investigated the election results. Unsurprisingly, the result held.

is situated had been won by the CNRP, and this made people nervous: 'we don't know what will happen now' an elderly man explained when we chatted about this. His anxiety proved to be grounded in reality. In the capital violent clashes occurred in as people protested the result (Human Rights Watch 2014). After the floods of August and September my research assistant, Phasy, returned to her home in Battambang province for a few days to help her family. There she discovered that when the floods displaced thousands of people, aid from the Cambodia Red Cross (run by Bun Rany, Hun Sen's wife) had only been distributed to those who had voted for the CPP. Administrative violence was as threatening and coercive as direct violence for many people.

## **Discussion**

Derrida's discussion of hauntology revolves around contemporary systems of neoliberalism, an illusion of which is that it somehow exorcises the spirits haunting its creation (in this case Marxism). The Khmer Rouge functions similarly in contemporary Khmer politics, with each party constructing a myth that they are the only ones who can exorcise its past. Derrida shows, however, that specters are not simply haunting pasts, but pasts that form the present. 'Haunting' he wrote (1994: 34) 'belongs to the structure of every hegemony.' Khmer political hegemony is certainly built on the back of Democratic Kampuchea, and the Khmer Rouge and their violence are precisely this kind of specter. To omit them from any kind of interaction with contemporary Cambodia is not only impossible, but, if adhering to Derrida's moral argument, unjust. They must be engaged with, because they form the reality in which we exist and create that which we will enter in the future. Derrida (1994: 13) wrote:

Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx; in any case of a certain Marx.

These words could just as easily apply to contemporary Cambodia, by simply replacing the word Marx, with 'the Khmer Rouge':

Not without the Khmer Rouge, no future without the Khmer Rouge, without the memory and inheritance of the Khmer Rouge; in any case of a certain Khmer Rouge.

The certain Khmer Rouge is that which contemporary politics and social life has created. 'Time continues to stretch meanings as well as significance,' Simons (1995: 57) wrote of the 1988-1989 violence in Mogadishu. In Cambodia the meanings associated with the Khmer Rouge are continually reinterpreted. For the CPP, they remain useful spirits with which to maintain power operated by fear. In the shadow of the UN-backed trials, these spirits are reshaped by the CNRP to demonstrate the push for justice and human rights that they deem only they can produce. Whilst doing so both perform in political circles formed in the wake of the regime that therefore rely on its presence for their very existence.

Derrida's specters exist with or without attention because they are the basis of all imaginings of contemporary and future ways of living. In Cambodia, however, the specters are cared for, maintained, made stronger, manipulated, used, and abused by those adopting them. Tallyn Gray, in his thesis on transitional justice in Cambodia, notes that Hun Sen wins votes through the narrative of 'not being Pol Pot' (Gray 2014: 191). David Chandler has argued that Hun Sen's emphasis of the term genocide in his discourse serves to give fascist imaginings to the Khmer Rouge regime (Chandler 2008a: 360). In doing so, it provides a perfect opposition

to his (supposedly) democratic rule. In the book *Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land* (2011) Joel Brinkley argues that the legacy of the Khmer Rouge serves to lower national and international expectations of conditions in Cambodia, enabling Hun Sen and the CPP to govern with impunity despite horrific human rights abuse, and high levels of ongoing direct and structural violence. But the Khmer Rouge is not simply a legacy. Spirits in Cambodia are social beings who interact in both positive and negative ways to engender social action. The specters of the Khmer Rouge are equally viable in contemporary Cambodia, and throughout the election campaigns became visible as they were continually reanimated and revived by the main parties. But they were not only viable specters; the regime haunts in the way contemporary Khmer politics is formed in relation to it, and performs new forms of political violence on the population.

Insecurity bubbles below the surface of daily lives for many of my informants. Memories (lived, imagined and narrated) of pain, terror, torture and death, of violent repressions and political horrors have permeated the social memory of many people, particularly those who lived through the decades of conflict in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s. Throughout the 1990s, May Ebiara and Judy Ledgerwood, anthropologists from the US, visited Svay, the village where Ebiara had undertaken her original fieldwork in the 1960s. Writing of these visits in 2002, they commented 'Cambodians today have a ... generalized fear about violence within their midst' (Ebiara and Ledgerwood 2002: 283). At the time it was focused on military personnel still present in the area. During my fieldwork this fear was no longer directed at military individuals, but to the wider political sphere.

It was not only the CPP who execute violence. The CNRP's election campaigning focuses on rhetorics of hatred against the Vietnamese – their leader Sam Rainsy regularly refers to the scourge of Yuan (a derogatory name for Vietnamese), and every election promises to eject them from the country. After the 2013 elections, Sam Rainsy called massive street protests in response to the election results, and implicitly threatened violence and public insecurity, but stated it would be Hun Sen's fault if such violence erupted (Vandenbrink 2013). The CNRP's election campaigning garnered anxiety amongst some of my informants, as did the fact that they had never ruled. My research assistant told me she and others were afraid of the CNRP getting power: 'the CPP have had power for such a long time, they already took a lot' she said. 'But the CNRP have never had power. Maybe they'll be worse because they want to get rich and rule the country.'

Writing about the fear that her informants in Guatemala lived with daily, Linda Green (1994) commented that many women spoke freely about their brutal pasts, but remained silent about their present. Amongst my older informants a similar self-censorship existed: they would discuss the Khmer Rouge period; the suffering they endured, the people they lost, where they had been, what they had done. They would speak of their terror, and how it resurfaced at reminders of the regime. But in discussing the contemporary political situation they were guarded. A few spoke of certain dissatisfactions: the land grabs that many had been subject to for example, but most attributed these actions to local, greedy politicians rather than examples of endemic corruption.<sup>222</sup> This silence remains as yet

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<sup>222</sup> A few people recognized that such politicians could only succeed with support of the party, by paying into the patronage system. One informant told me: 'people who climb trees to pick its fruit; if you give them the fruits, you're OK. If not, they will drag you off the tree. If you can find benefits for them, they will let you climb higher and higher up that tree.'

another specter. During Democratic Kampuchea no-one knew who could be trusted: children betrayed parents, husbands betrayed wives, siblings and friends betrayed each other. People learned to keep silent. The Khmer idiom that developed during the regime, *daum dor koh* – to plant a mute [koh] tree – refers to this silencing: of fear, of objections, of pain, of sorrow. ‘Whatever we saw, we didn’t talk about it. When they did something to us, we stayed silent,’ Om Srey told me. ‘It was like the story of the bald King’ Om Broh, an elderly neighbour, explained:

The people during that time, there were no smiles on their faces; we could not laugh or smile at each other. Husbands and wives only spoke a few words to each other. Why? Because there were spies under our houses, listening to us, in case we said something bad, that we hated *Ângkar*. The feelings of grief filled my chest. It was just like in the story of the Bald King. Have you heard about this story?

**No.**

The King had a confidant. Since this confidant came to work for him, the King had never taken off his hat. He even wore it when he was sleeping. The confidant was very curious about this. One day, when the king was bathing, the confidant tried to see his head. He saw that there was no hair on the King’s head; it was completely bald. Afterwards, the confidant knew what was underneath the King’s hat. He felt very troubled, so he ran until he saw a Rang tree with a hole in it. The confidant went to it, and shouted ‘The King is bald!’ He shouted into the hole. What I want to say is that we felt completely trapped in our chests because we could not say anything.

This muteness remains. Not knowing how people are connected maintains a level of distrust amongst neighbours and friends that is hard to break. This extends to local affairs, as well as political connections. One evening two of the men from Koh Sop got into a drunken fight. Ta Sim took an axe, and using it as a club, attacked Ta Sok. He beat him badly and broke his leg. Everyone in the village knew what had happened; many had watched it. When the police came to investigate, however, people remained silent; 'We don't get involved in other people's business' Om Srey told me. 'I told my children, whatever you saw, don't tell anyone. They might know *Neak Thom* [important people].' This silence, evolving out of fear, extends distrust, which provokes further violence of many villages.

For people such as Om Srey, Om Broh and others, insecurity in the political sphere exists hidden just beneath the surface of everyday life, not as something continually terrifying but a subcutaneous anxiety that needs only a tiny pinprick to make it burst forth. A violent political sphere that maintains the Khmer Rouge - through spoken rhetoric and embodied practice - has become a form of terror and a mode of political repression. The revitalization of the regime is all the stronger because of where campaigning occurs: on mass graves; material markers of the violence and terror; repositories of the dead. Reminders of the Khmer Rouge acts as visceral transporters back to the regime, not because they take the mind back to the period, but because the regime never died; either physically or metaphorically. Its presence has been maintained throughout the years, as articulated by one of my informants:

Every time they celebrate *Bon* [a ceremony], they remember the Khmer Rouge.

Eradicate the Khmer Rouge? How? How can we?



This was what we saw at the remembrance ceremony at Choeung Ek, and the political rallies against Kem Sokha. At the remembrance days the violence was re-enacted at the killing site, in front of the mass graves, and in front of the stupa holding the remains of thousands of those tortured and executed. The days selected - 17<sup>th</sup> April (marking the day the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh and took over Cambodia) and 20<sup>th</sup> May (commemorating the date in 1976 when collectivisation became the de facto lifestyle in Democratic Kampuchea) – are themselves reminders of violence, not liberation or peace.<sup>223</sup> Talking of the rallies against Kem Sokha, Youk Chhang (Mengleng and Zsombar 2013), director of DC-Cam, was quoted as saying:

His [Kem Sokha's] statements remind me that things can be forgotten if we don't keep reminding the public.

This was what the rallies ensured.

The rumours we heard functioned differently depending on the routes of circulation. Amongst my expat colleagues they circulated through the global social media spheres, providing a form of social capital to those spreading them (look how exciting I am, living in such a dangerous place). For many of my Khmer informants, however, the rumours reflected feelings of genuine threat because they consisted of the re-telling of actions and experiences from the not too distant past. In discussing the 1988 – 1989 violence in Mogadishu, Simons (1995: 57) wrote:

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<sup>223</sup> December 25<sup>th</sup>, when Vietnam invaded Democratic Kampuchea (in 1978), and January 7<sup>th</sup>, the date when they overcame the Khmer Rouge (in 1979), meanwhile, have no ceremonies associated with them today (although January 7<sup>th</sup> is marked on the Khmer calendar).

it is precisely this felt knowledge, this experiential, terrifying, time-warping, never-complete sense of what was happening *then* that history will never record and the future contexts will lack.

While the historical record may not record such feelings, the memories of Om Srey and others did. When reminded of the period they recalled Democratic Kampuchea in visceral detail as Bu Broh explained:

I remember my past. I remember the sadness and the agony. I remember, and I am frightened.

This felt knowledge is solidified because the violence never ended. The current regime is brutal. The opposition is racist. Politically motivated killings, imprisonments, and exile, is common. Domestic abuse is rife. Conflict between rival gangs is frequent. Life in Koh Sop when I was there was fuelled with alcohol and violence.

Rumours often co-exist with political violence as forms of narrative by which people attempt to wrestle control of frightening situations and assert authority: over themselves; over their lives; over knowledge. Although they exist on the 'edge of silence' (Feldman 1995), they provide a means for lifting that silence and gaining some form of empowerment. As Feldman (1995: 230) asserts, rumours emerge when people are disempowered, uniformed, and, often, frightened.<sup>224</sup> They function beyond story-telling myth and legend only within circles of viability, and that viability exists where prior experience remains vibrant and visible, particularly in the collective sphere:

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<sup>224</sup> They can also occur as modes of gaining social capital: as people create, narrate, and reiterate stories, they assert themselves as the holders of knowledge.

Rumor is prognostic, not in terms of actual prediction, but in terms of a culturally mediated sense of possibility, structural predilection, political tendency, and symbolic projection. It provides a preview of how historical events will be culturally and ideologically negotiated, distorted, transformed, recollected, and rendered into allegory.

The tension was pervasive, and invaded my own experience. On the trip to Phnom Penh that Om Srey and I discussed I tried to access my facebook account, but it was down. Other internet sites I checked were working. In my fieldnotes I wrote:

I'm starting to get a bit paranoid about surveillance etc. Facebook is down; I can't get to my page. Found myself wondering if it's because I was writing to a friend criticizing the government. But I deleted it. Surely they can't find it...? Then I started to worry about my visa. What would happen if I was thrown out? Worse: what if I was set up and end up in some jail with a sentence no one can overthrow?

Writing of his fieldwork in Northern Ireland during the troubles, Allen Feldman (1995: 248) commented on the way his perceptions were altered by and through the perceptions of his interlocutors:

My perception was no longer my own when I ceased to have telephone conversations that lasted more than thirty seconds, when I never used people's names over the telephone, when the back of my scalp itched as I felt the patrolling British soldiers tracking my movements with the barrels of their automatic rifles, when I leaped off the front parlor couch along with my hosts at a car backfiring in the night, when I abruptly terminated conversations because

police vehicles were circling the neighbourhood streets with more frequency since I arrived...

I do not know how much of my own fear and tension reflected that of my informants, but the heightened tension and increased violence certainly had some impact.

The pervasive violence of the political sphere continues today. In February 2015, Hun Sen again threatened the return of the Khmer Rouge when the scope of the ECCC was expanded beyond the five people already under jurisdiction, commenting: '[The court] expands its scope, nearly making people flee back into the forest'<sup>225</sup> (Naren 2015). Politics in Cambodia is characterized by brutality, chaos and violence built from the ashes of a merciless regime that formed every subsequent imagining and performance of politics in post-Democratic Kampuchea. The Khmer Rouge is blamed for issues as far reaching as the crumbling of trust in communities (Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002), sex trafficking and other human rights abuses (Leakhena 2012), the endemic corruption across the country (Brinkley 2011), and the poor educational attainment in the nation (de Walque 2004). But it does more than just haunt: the Khmer Rouge is the basis on which action, interaction and analysis are formed in contemporary Cambodia, and it is reformed through continued violence within the political sphere.

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<sup>225</sup> The forest (*prei*) is not only a metaphor for the wild, untamed and uncontrollable, but was also a common metaphor for the Khmer Rouge, who initially spent many years as guerilla fighters in the forests of Cambodia. When working with ex-cadre, they would often allude to their Khmer Rouge membership by saying 'I fought in the forests.'

## Conclusion

Taking some respite one weekend, my partner and I took a trip to Siem Reap to visit the temples of Angkor. Stretching over many kilometers, the temple complexes are truly magnificent feats of architecture built between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Attempting to avoid the crowds one evening, we took a tuktuk away from the main sites to visit the more remote site of Phnom Krom – a small and crumbling ruin on top of a hill with a dramatic view over the plains to the Tonle Sap river. As we sat breathing in the view, a young Khmer man approached us. At first we tried to limit the conversation - we were enjoying the peace and the solitude - however, he persisted. The platitudes soon diminished and his reason for approaching us emerged. Chea was a very angry and disillusioned man; upset with the current government of Cambodia and the way he felt it was ruining the country. 'Cambodia used to be a great nation' he told us. The temples were his proof of that. Everyday he cycled the twenty-odd kilometres from his home just north of Siem Reap to visit Phnom Krom temple where he could contemplate the greatness of Angkor and wish for its return. Chea spoke to us in English: it was only by approaching foreigners in a secluded location that he could freely vent his anger and frustration at contemporary politics – if he spoke in Khmer he could not be certain that his comments would not be reported, even amongst friends.

Politics in Cambodia remains rife with corruption and violence. Both major political parties use violent narratives to manipulate the populous, and the general population neither trust, nor feel safe within the political sphere. Several mass graves in Cambodia, such as Choeung Ek, and Wat Kampong Tralach, have

come to serve specifically political purposes, highlighted during my fieldwork by political campaigning occurring on them in the run up to the general election. As markers of violence and death, reinforced through the display of human remains, these gravesites enable those who appropriate them to reanimate the specters of the Khmer Rouge, reviving their violence, and the terror wrought within people at their presence. These are not simply memories: their imagined presence holds real viability, made all the more convincing because of the affective power of maintaining these spirits. The more often the current government tells their mythical tale, the more deeply entrenched it becomes in the collective narratives of the population: that the Khmer Rouge could re-appear at any moment, and that only they can keep them safe. Every time the violence is re-presented, re-enacted, or repeated, people are reminded of the pain and suffering caused. Everytime the political parties enact new violences they ensure insecurity within the political sphere. This is the Khmer Rouge hauntology.

In 1998, having finally persuaded Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea to make peace and defect to the government, Hun Sen made a statement to the press declaring that:

We should dig a hole and bury the past and look ahead to the 21st century with a clean slate (Mydans 1998)

He himself, however, has failed to do this. Using the Khmer Rouge regularly in his narratives since 1979, he has maintained them as a genuine threat in people's imagination. Spectres, Derrida explains (1994: 39), are threatening because they collapse time into itself: the borders of time and experience become blurred, or completely obliterated, as the past becomes a real presence in the present and

future. The past does not just pave a path to the future: it becomes the future. If you do not vote for me, Hun Sen argues, the Khmer Rouge **will** return. Politicians have hijacked the Khmer Rouge as a tool to create a climate where supporters rally behind them for 'protection'. Based on the affective dimension of real, lived experience, this fear is made all the more explicit because of where much of this campaigning occurs: on the spaces of death - the killing fields of Cambodia, the mass graves and the dead they contain. But the regime never really ended; it was always present, shaping the form of politics in Cambodia today.

## **Conclusion: Now is the Time for the Living**

In her analysis of dead body politics, Katherine Verdery asserted that in the creation of nations the silent manipulability of corpses are politically harnessed to create new cosmologies, cosmologies that not only relate to the construction of national identities, but also work on understandings of kinship, relationships to ancestors, religion, ritual, space and time (Verderey 1999: 96). Using mass graves as the lens through which to view it, this thesis shows how these cosmologies are being re-imagined and re-constituted to create a 'new' Cambodia following the devastating rule of the Khmer Rouge, and to imagine its future. This has involved exploring local connections to the dead as well as state level uses of them and their graves.

By examining these two different aspects of life amongst the graves in Cambodia, this thesis has shown that it is not only the dead that are political, but also their spaces of torture, pain, death, burial, and disposal. It has also illustrated how in Cambodia individual relationships and everyday interactions with the dead are equally political to extraordinary and state uses of them, because both enable social relationships and action to be narrated and performed in multiple and overlapping ways, and following the Khmer Rouge regime, to be reconstituted in new and innovative ways, ways that not only enable people to deal with the past, but also to create a new future.

Because of this, the Khmer Rouge regime has created new spaces for imagining life and community in contemporary Cambodia, and has triggered a re-imagining of categories of social life, including relationships with the dead, kinship, religion,



and relationships between the state and its people, as well as between Cambodia and the wider global community. Mass graves, and the dead they contain, are central components in these reimaginings because as Verdery argues, social relations, political hierarchies, religious systems and wider understandings of what it means to be in a particular place at a particular time are made visible by changing relationships with both.

The dead have been integral in the rebuilding of Cambodia – in the support they gave to people in the early days, in the support they now give to the nation in its economic development and future stability, and in the imprint in the minds of those who see them that they leave, teaching the world about Cambodia, its past and present, that causes them to engage with the country and its people. As we saw in the first section of this thesis, the dead in Cambodia make visible the political situation of the living, not because they are a reflection of it, but because they too experience it. In Cambodia the dead are socially salient beings whose lives parallel those of the living, and they are subject to many of the same stresses and tensions that the living endure. Life after Democratic Kampuchea was chaotic and unstable; the instability was partly negotiated by managing relations with the dead and negotiating ways in which the living and the dead could not only co-exist, but support each other in the rebuilding of Cambodia. This necessitated finding a way by which the hundreds of thousands of dead caused by the Khmer Rouge regime could be calmed and reintegrated into social life, but rather than through ritual, it was primarily through relationships of support. Negotiating reciprocal relationships with the dead, the living were able to engage their help, and as the dead helped the living, the living helped the dead, who like them had been disconnected from their kin and tossed into chaos and confusion by the massive

displacements that occurred during the regime. As the living and the dead began to negotiate, both were able to start rebuilding their lives, their social statuses, and their country. The demise of the dead over time has paralleled the political stability of the country and its people as it has transitioned from a wild and chaotic country to a relatively calm and ordered society.

Religion is often a central component in the re-assertion of social, political, and moral economies following war and conflict. In Cambodia, Buddhism and animism have been crucial in this. Offering a means by which people could explain and narrate the chaos, death and destruction, Buddhism in particular was central to the way my informants related to the devastation wrought by the regime. For some it enabled them to repair the ruptures in kin and social life that the loss of up to a third of the population caused, for others it gave them ways to discuss and enfold the events into the Khmer cosmology, becoming an expected event within the Buddhist cosmic cycle and connecting the period before the regime to that following it. For others it provided a mode of cosmic justice, not only to the perpetrators, but also to those who died. In this way, the violence of the regime has been incorporated into today's life, and rather than being reminders of terrible violence, the graves it resulted in can be integrated into everyday living space.

Moving on from relationships between individual living and dead, the second section of this thesis examined how the symbolic power of the mass graves and their dead is harnessed in the wider political sphere. The ruling party has two primary concerns in contemporary Cambodia: development of the country and

retention of political authority and power. The graves have become significant tools in achieving these aims.

In some countries it is the dead of the named and famous that perform political power (the corpses of Lenin or Mao Zedong for example), but in locations where genocide, civil conflict, and war have occurred it is the mass, nameless, dead that perform the most useful political functions. This is the case in Cambodia, where those who died during the Khmer Rouge are most useful to the state as anonymous dead who can be harnessed as a collective: 'the dead,' 'the victims of the Khmer Rouge.' Controlling the location of the physical remains of the dead, and the structure of narratives behind the creation of these dead and their graves, the Cambodian state legitimates and asserts its authority, presenting a politically salient narration of the period: one of innocent Cambodian victims, of an evil perpetrated by a mythified collective 'the Khmer Rouge.' This narrative includes a re-telling of the state's role in the emancipation of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge, and the maintenance of relative peace and stability, and by doing so asserts the Prime Minister, Hun Sen's, position as patron and protector of the country. It also reduces the culpability of the regime to a handful of guilty perpetrators, obfuscating the complexities behind the regime's rise to power, the place of key members of government (including the Prime Minister and Party Chairman) in the regime, and the ongoing structural and direct violence affecting Cambodia today.

Contemporaneously, Democratic Kampuchea has been politicized in contemporary Cambodia, and though most of the graves have been returned to everyday living space, some have come to serve public political functions that are

used in the dual aims of ensuring economic development in Cambodia and ensuring the ongoing political hegemony by the Cambodian People's Party and their leader Hun Sen. Through the commodification of certain sites of death, in particular Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng, the Cambodian state has embraced the growing trend of dark tourism to its advantage. It is not only the state who exploits this. The central role of such sites in Cambodian tourism is directly linked in the imaginations of the staff and the state to economic prosperity and international assistance to Cambodia. As tourists visit they engage in reciprocal relationships with Cambodia, supporting it even as they cause changes in it.

Choeung Ek, and other memorials displaying the dead, have largely been viewed as externally faced and therefore contested and conflictual spaces, however, as this thesis has shown, it was not viewed as abusive by my informants: neither those whose relatives and friends were killed, buried, and are possibly displayed there, nor those who interact with them daily, at home and for work. This comes from the fact that the anonymous remains are everyone's and no-one's and rely, therefore, on state care rather than individual. With no-one knowing whose dead were which, the care of the physical remains was devolved to the state. Even the dead are agreeable with it – they get visitors and are amongst their fellows; they have been brought in from the forest.

The political landscape in Cambodia remains a sphere of violence, haunted by Democratic Kampuchea. Power is gained and maintained through direct, structural, threatened and remembered violence. At the same time as marketing Khmer Rouge sites for tourism, political parties use them in the re-animation of the regime. Remembrance in Cambodia does not memorialise those who died,

except in the widest, most abstract sense. Mostly memorials are to the violence and terror of the regime. As markers of violence and death, reinforced through the display of human remains, these gravesites enable those who appropriate them to reanimate the spectres of the Khmer Rouge, reviving their violence, and the terror wrought within people at their presence. These are not simply memories: their imagined presence holds real viability, made all the more convincing because of the affective power of maintaining these spirits. Whilst claiming authority to 'exorcise' the Khmer Rouge regime from Cambodia, both main political parties actually maintain them. The haunting of the Khmer Rouge is not only through this maintenance: it is in the way politics today is formed out of the regime, and recreates and reinforces a political sphere imbued with fear and distrust, in which violent discourses are the norm and authoritarian rule is maintained under the guise of liberal democracy.

The structure of this thesis suggests that there is a straightforward dichotomy between the political use of mass graves (where the dead are reduced to a collective mass, and subsequently used in political manipulation for economic prosperity and maintenance of power) and individual relationships to these spaces and the dead within them (where those who died are remembered through individual interactions and relationships with them). This fits with the international discourse on mass violence, which is one of enduring suffering and a contestation between state and individual politics. This might be so in some cases, but it is not always, and usually is not clear cut, and even where the state and individuals use the graves for different things, they are not necessarily in opposition. Often the situation is messy and remains in flux – now seemingly steady, it could re-emerge at any time. The two ethnographic sections of this

thesis are inextricably linked, and many of the themes of this thesis overlap and influence each other. In Cambodia politics of the dead is not only related to the way the dead are used by the state, but also how they themselves are integrated or excluded from the social life of the living. Mass graves are not only exploited by the state, but also by individuals and local communities. Comparing chapters four and six for example, we can see how both the dead and the living are subject to the wider political sphere within which they exist, and work towards future aims. Chapters two and five, meanwhile, show that the often criticised display of human remains around the country also serves as a means to care for the dead who have no relatives, or whose relatives cannot recognise their remains.

Only recently has much attention been paid to socio-cultural relationships with mass graves, and this thesis aims to contribute to this growing body of work. Much work that does exist concerns the missing, and essentialises mass graves in which their bodies lie as negative and traumatic, because the dead they contain almost invariably result from some dreadful event, whether it be conflict, violence, an endemic, or disaster. The symbolic power of the dead means that they retain connections to these terrible events long after the results have stopped being visible elsewhere. And because of the connections they retain, attention paid to mass graves somehow revivifies the event from which they died. This is, of course, often the case. Around the globe we see anguish and despair where mass graves abound, and more and more countries around the world are beginning to investigate these graves; returning long lost remains to the kin and country from which they come.

But the mass graves in Cambodia are somewhat different to those of other conflicts such as Bosnia-Herzegovina or Rwanda because they were caused by Khmer on Khmer. There was no easily identifiable foreign other to lay the blame at the feet of, and those causing the graves are mostly still at large, many in positions of responsibility in the local, regional, and national government. There is no political motivation (national or local) for excavating the graves. The government have as many remains as they need to tell a tale of victimhood and their saving. There is no social use for victim identity related to the dead of the Khmer Rouge – everyone is a victim of the Khmer Rouge in this newly narrated story of blame and the subsumation of blame under Pol Pot. Even those tried at the ECCC, with reams and reams of evidence against them, used this narrative. Neither do the graves need unearthing to disclose political violences; they were never clandestine, never denied<sup>226</sup>, and the dead did not need unearthing because they could be properly cared for and move on to their next life without it.

The unearthing of mass graves is often used in the formation of a new state – graves mark the land and their unearthing, by bringing the dead back into the embrace of the state, divides those who made the graves and those who disclose them. As such they often reconfigure time – creating a new era and life within it. Although the CPP worked hard to present a new temporality, for most of my informants, rather than a new era, the connections allowed by Buddhism and animism collapsed temporal distinctions and allowed connections to be made between the periods before the regime and that which came after it. Viewed as a period of destruction that had to happen due to cyclical time, the Khmer Rouge regime became an explainable event of Khmer Buddhist cosmology. Because of

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<sup>226</sup> Except briefly by the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2005).

this, most of the Khmer people I encountered did not present themselves as victims of trauma. The Khmer Rouge period was seen as a terrible history, but as one belonging to a particular time and context, except where it was usefully harnessed in the present or its memory provoked by some event. However, it is integral to contemporary Cambodia, not only as a terrible historical period, but because all imaginings and relationships within the new Khmer state are formed from it. The fractures it caused in all aspects of Khmer life were devastating, and needed rebuilding following its fall: political stability, moral order, social relationships, religious understanding. This has been critical to the building of a new Cambodia, creating spaces for new imaginings of Cambodian life, kinship, religion, ritual, politics and Cambodia's place in the global sphere.

While some scholars have argued that privileging the Khmer Rouge period in academic consideration limits discourses on Cambodia, and reifies particular presentations of the country and its past, this thesis has shown that this is not the case. Nor has the politicisation of Democratic Kampuchea, its dead, and their graves, provided a stagnated narrative. While the dead appear to only mean one thing, as this thesis shows, they are plurivocal and significant (and symbolic) in a multitude of ways. Their significance is temporally and contextually variable, and although it often varies between the government and everyday people, their narrations and the work to which they put them, sometimes these collide.

Though this thesis centres on two main fieldsites it was fed and developed through research at fifteen others. As such, although it cannot claim to be a holistic study of mass graves in Cambodia, it can draw some general themes, as have been explored herein. However, my time at sites beyond these central ones



was short, and further research at other locations outside Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng would benefit the understanding of mass graves in Cambodia. One of the largest omissions from almost all considerations of the mass graves in Cambodia is the number of cadre contained within them. While it is true that all whose bodies lie within the graves are victims of the regime's violence and destruction, many Khmer Rouge cadre have a very particular relationship to the mass graves, having been their creators, as well as potentially having kin within them. This would be an interesting avenue of further exploration that may enable further problematisation of the simplistic dichotomies between perpetrator and victim that are often presented with regard to Democratic Kampuchea. In addition, in my research I worked mostly with Khmer people of Cambodian ancestry. Relationships between the dead and the living are considerably different for the Khmer-Chinese community, and would prove a stimulating avenue of further exploration. Finally, comparative work between the graves in Cambodia and other communist regimes, both those in Asia and beyond, would provide an interesting avenue of study for more general, wider statements to be made.

The story told in this thesis, emphasising mass graves and the dead of the Khmer Rouge, evolved, of course, from my own interests and research agenda. Its emphasis on these subjects implies they are central and omnipresent in people's daily lives and imaginations, as if these are a topic of continual thought, reflection and conversation. This is not the daily, lived reality for most of my informants, although it has been my lived reality for the last four years. During fieldwork these topics appeared only sporadically in everyday life, however, these occasional appearances were indicative of the ongoing imagined presence of the Khmer Rouge and the imprint of their violence in contemporary Cambodia. As

such a multitude of other encounters have been lost in the ether; I hope one day they re-emerge. Those that remain do something, I hope, towards illuminating the encounters with mass graves and those who died under the Khmer Rouge regime of my informants and myself in contemporary Cambodia. Cambodia has many ghosts, but life continues changing, and they may not haunt it forever. As Srey Srey said to the dead one day as we walked around Choeung Ek: 'you have already died. Now is the time for the living.'

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### **Appendix one: DC-Cam List of Mass Graves**

<http://www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Mapping.htm>